Hello, Hello and Hello
葉月 文
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Prologue: My Encounter with Her

This is the one week love story I (boku) lost 214 times.
And—
This is the love story I (watashi) obtained which spanned four years.
“Hey, Yoshi-kun. I—”
A girl I did not know of called out to me.
It was a voice as warm as the spring sun, as gentle as the breeze lifting the flowers.
Thinking back about it, that voice was the first thing that attracted me.
❀
The hour hand passed 10, and it was 11pm.
My shoulder bag was filled with textbooks, the belt of the bag sinking deep into my shoulder, causing pain. My stomach was rumbling away. Normally, I would have returned home at this time.
But on that day, I wandered aimlessly around town.
What happened hours ago could not leave my mind.
The truly earnest eyes I ran away from.
The strong emotions.
Back in the dim classroom after school, my classmate, Akane Rindou said to me,
“I like you, Haru. Please go out with me.”
Her face was completely red, and her shoulders were quivering before me.
Her voice alone was loud, unfaltering.
She was as charming and pretty as usual.
Really, really pretty.
Thus, it’d be great if I said that I liked her back.
In fact, I was a little admiring of Akane. However, the feelings I had for her was different from hers. It didn’t matter whether it was the color, the shape, the weight, or even the types.
The feelings we harbored for each other were of unequal values.
That fact alone prevented our feelings from reaching each other.
“Sorry.”
I swallowed my saliva that quenched my parched throat, and eked out these words.
Akane’s head lowered slowly, and finally dropped. The long hair covering her shoulders covered her expression. Even though, Akane tried to speak up a few times, but her thoughts were merely conveyed in breaths, unable to form words.
I too could not say anything as I lowered my head, and escaped the empty classroom.
I forgot everything that happened after that. Part of my mind was numb, unable to move. I didn’t return home, and merely wandered about.

It was winter, but my back was soaked in sweat. The world in my eyes was without focus, shaking about. My feet seemed to have forgotten how to stop as I kept moving forward again and again.
And so, I finally stopped after walking to an ordinary space.
For it was not the billboard, which had changed sometime back, that I noticed.
This place had been vacant for many years, but it seemed a building would be built starting next season. I see. So this place will be gone? I didn't know if I should consider them memories, but this was a place I had some memories of.
It was the place I buried a cat at.
A beautiful cat with pure white fur.
The white cat had closed its eyes, looking asleep when I touched its little body with my fingertips. It was then, that for the first time in my life, I understood that concept. Yes, no life exists in it. It was just a hollow husk. Stiff, heavy, colder than anything.
What appeared before the middle schooler me was 'death'.
I was powerless before this.
And like most people on this world, I poured dirt upon the white body just to get my heart to relax, and clapped my hands together. That happened about four years ago.
By the time I realized it, my feet had stumbled towards the center of the space. Maybe I should clap my hands together to pray again. It would be a perfect opportunity to end this never-ending escape, so I thought.
And it was there that I met her.
It was a pretty girl as white as the cat. Her skin was white as snow, her cheeks as red as apples. The long hair had snowflakes resting on her hair. A snowflake touched the face of this girl, whose name I knew not of, and it melted away. She was smiling blissfully, yet because of that one snowflake, she appeared to be crying.
Her finely-shaped lips moved, finally composing pure white words.
–Hey, Yoshi-kun. I like you.
Why was that?
Why was it that Akane's words did not move me at all, but a stranger girl easily got me moving? Aspects like composure and rationality were shredded apart at that moment.
Before those emotions, I was utterly powerless.
Upon hearing my answer, she smiled.
She seemed really happy.
And also, a little forlorn.
It was winter, in my third year of high school.
That was how I met Yuki Shiina.
This was my encounter with Yuki.
Thus,
Yes, because of that, I knew nothing.

Nothing of Yuki’s feelings when she confessed to me back then.
Nothing of the determination Yuki had at that moment when she decided to smile before me.
Nothing of what Yuki gave me, of the things that melted and fell from my hands.
Really, I knew of nothing at all.

Contact.92

どこにもない約束

Chapter 1: Contact.92 – The Promise that Existed Nowhere

“It’s sudden, but can I request something from you?”
I was approached by a girl I never met.
It happened when I was on the way home from school.
I heard a delightful voice, one unforgettable after hearing the first time.
“Well, I want you to bring me to the movies.”
I was at the old bus stop I was acquainted with since young; the faded zinc sheets, the wooden bench continually exposed to the weather.
Standing next to them was an unfamiliar girl.
The street lights were not exactly orange or yellow, draping the girl’s nice body in gold, bringing her out from the darkness. Even the somewhat old lights made her out to be some kind of sacred being when shining upon her.
She tilted her head cutely, probably because I remained silent.
“You didn’t hear me?”
Before I knew it, the me reflected in the girl’s eyes looked a lot larger than before. They’re close, real close. Why’s she able to just approach me so casually. Feeling disturbed, I gulped, the saliva drenching my thirst.
“No, I heard you.”
My voice was a lot softer than I wanted, hoarse even.
This time, it was I who was worried if she did hear me.
Really? That’s good. This time however, it was the girl who said that, patting down on her ample breasts. It appeared my message did reach her.
“I’m Yuki Shiina. Nice to meet you, Haruyoshi-kun.”
“Huh? Hello. Erm, Shiina-san?”
“Call me Yuki.”
Yuki Shiina beamed. She’s really a shockingly cute girl.
The hair reaching her shoulders seemed ironed, a little curly. Her skin’s white as snow. Because of this, her fine, bloody red lips looked alluring despite her not having any accessories on.
When the gust blew, so her hair fluttered. I unwittingly scented upon a fragrance. What is this scent? After thinking for a moment, I had an answer.
Yeah, it’s the fragrance of the cherry blossoms.
The moment I found this answer, what struck my heart was a sudden torrent of emotions: pain, agony, searing heat. My heart tightened.
I put my hand on the left chest of my uniform, and at the same time, called out her name as she had wished. Yes, I really am trying to bluff my way out of things I should be doing.
“Yuki, you said you want me to bring you to the movies. What’s going on?”
“You’ll be going to watch a movie tomorrow, right?”
“……Tomorrow’s a working day.”

“Yes, I know. But your high school will be closed tomorrow to celebrate its founding?”
She, no, Yuki spoke in a matter of fact. Tomorrow’s set lunch is curry, it’s written on the menu. That’s the manner in which she replied.
“You’ll use this vacation to watch a movie, right? You have two tickets. Or have you asked someone out?”
“How do you know, Yuki? I never mentioned it to anyone.”
I recalled back to a few days ago, when my friends invited me out. I rejected them, saying that I had something important. Akane in particular fervently questioned why; since you’re going out alone, bring me along. Nevertheless, I never mentioned the reason.
I didn’t want any acquaintance to notice us together, and watching a movie with her would just be an interrogation. Obviously, I’ll be teased about this matter years later.
The girl before my eyes seemingly failed to comprehend my emotions as she smiled.
“Uu, hmm. I’ll keep this a secret then.”
“Why?”
“Because, a girl with secrets should be more attractive, right?”
It appeared she had no intention of answering me directly.
I tried waiting for a while, but I didn’t get a decent answer. Yuki merely stood there, smiling, knowing that I was waiting for her reply, but choosing to remain silent.
In this battle of patience, I lost.
“I didn’t ask anyone out. Got two tickets on hand.”
“Then bring me along.”
“Why do you want to see the movie?”
“……I promised to watch it.”
“With who?”
Yuki continued to smile. I didn’t know if it’s just me, but her smile seemed a little sadder than before.
I looked up at the sky, and so did Yuki.
Unknowingly, the darkness in the sky had become very deep.
The clouds in the night skies were thin and few, and the many stars sparkled. It’ll be really cool if I’m able to find just one constellation here.
Unfortunately, I don’t have any of such knowledge.
I found nothing in the vast, endless night sky.
“I see. So you promised.”
“Yes.”
“Since it’s a promise, I can only go along with that.”
I tried saying this instead of talking about the constellations. It’s embarrassing, but I was spent just from saying this line.
“Got it. Let’s go together then.”
“Really? Thank you.”
“I remember there’s a train ride at 10.10. Shall we meet up at the gantry?”

“Mn, no problems. I’m really looking forward to tomorrow!”
We waved hands, bidding each other goodbye.
Yuki went off in the opposite direction of this street, the only one. Soon, her petite silhouette vanished.
I watched her until she vanished, before moving on.
My mind was filled with the girl I had just met, and it lingered for a long, long time.
The fragrance of Spring, the slender body, the fine fingers moving through the hair fluttering with the wind, resembling a piece of glass art. The long, narrow eyebrows, the pitch black eyes, the nicely shaped red lips. So I recalled, and then——
The moment Yuki’s voice echoed in my mind, I stopped.
For a question clearly floated in my mind.
Hm? Did I tell my name?
Of course, nobody would answer. Yuki’s pleased smile as she sidestepped the issue remained in my mind.
That happened in Autumn, during my first year of High School.
This was how I encountered Shiina Yuki.
I arrived at the station 30 minutes early, but it was Yuki who arrived earlier.
We probably could ride on an earlier train.
But my legs, wanting to run towards Yuki, hesitated if they should approach her anymore.
Her back was leaning on the pillar, looking into an empty void. Her sidelong face had the disposition of an artistic masterpiece, giving her an unapproachable vibe.
On a closer look, many peeked towards her from time to time, but none dared to speak to her. It takes a lot of courage to go up and talk to her.
I gulped, rubbed my sweaty palms off my pants, forced my legs to move towards her when they couldn’t, slowly raised my hand, and finally managed to talk to her.
“Good morning. You’re really early.”
Yuki noticed me due to my voice. Her palms pushed off the pillar, and she hurried towards me.
“Have you waited for long?”
“No. I just arrived.”
Ehehe, Yuki giggled.
The thorns around her vanished before I knew it. I heaved a sigh of relief, and the heat rising from the bottom of my lungs seemingly merged into the clear air.
“Sorry, I’ll take note of it next time. It’s not good to keep a girl waiting.”
“You don’t have to worry. You’re really sincere there, Yoshi-kun.”
“Yoshi-kun?”
“Yes. Haruyoshi, so Yoshi-kun. Can’t I call you that?”
“Not that you can’t but I never had anyone call me that before.”
Normally, I’m either called Segawa or Haru.

My little sister Natsuna and my parents call me Haru. I'm a little uneasy to be called something different for the first time.
"Then this is my personal way of addressing you."
Yuki smiled, barely her white teeth, and pulled my arm towards her.
I barely managed to maintain my balance, and avoid falling forward. The distance between us decreased by a step or so.
Yuki's small, cold hand seemingly robbed me of my warmth as she grabbed onto my wrist. I felt hot just from being grabbed. I was unable to look up, and merely continued to stare at the dirty tips of my shoes..
"Okay, let's go then, Yoshi-kun."
The moment she said this, I thought of something I forgot to ask yesterday.
"Anyway, do you know where we're going today?"
The movie I was going to see on this day was different . To describe it, well, it's different from those movies heavily featured on the TV ads, and it's not aired at a cinema either.
But Yuki ignored all of my concerns.
"That's a weird question. We're going to Yasaka University, right?"
There's a town two stations from where I'm living, with lots of slopes.
Yasaka University's located at the longest slope in that town.
In fact, we have to take the bus after alighting from the station.
"Ah, it's there, right, Yoshi-kun? Here, have a look?"
Yuki said. We were almost ten minutes into our bus ride.
There was a large gate at where she was pointing, and a large sign.
The sign contained colourful popup words "60th Aksho Festival'.
This Yasaka University began holding this one week festival since Sunday.
The tickets I had are for the 'movie club self-produced film' airing during this culture festival.
I forgot if it happened a year ago, or at least half, but due to a certain incident, I so happened to obtain these two tickets.
The moment I entered the school gates, I felt a sudden change in the atmosphere around me.
There was an infrequent sight of the leaves colored in Autumn, and beneath them,
There were many stalls on display in the school, along with the intense riff of guitars from afar. For a YOSAKOI, the clappers sounded delightful. It really seemed like a real festival.
I received a pamphlet from a big sister, and immediately flipped through it, intending to check the schedule of the movie. It's a 30 minute short film, and including break time, it airs once every one and a half hours.
There's ten minutes until the next airing. If we hurry, we should be able to make it. I checked the location on the map, and if we hurry, we might be able to make it. I continued to flip through, wanting to check the location on the map, but my pamphlet got snatched away.
I lifted my hands, and found Yuki holding a pamphlet in each hand.
"What are you doing?"

“I’m asking you that, Yoshi-kun. What are you doing?”
“Doing what…looking for where the movie screening is, of course?.”
Haa. Yuki sighed, shaking her head as she gave a ‘you don’t understand’ look.
“You can look around and find that place. More importantly, this is a rare festival. Stalls, performing bands, and haunted houses. If you ignore them all and go straight to your destination, it’ll be a waste. Karma will strike you, know?”
“I don’t want to be hit by karma.”
“Then let’s walk around. It’ll be fun. Come on, let’s go!”
That’s how we started walking around the festival.
Yuki sniffed around the stalls corner with her little nose, and was finally tempted by the fragrance as she queued at the crepes shop. She hesitated over whether she should add strawberries or chocolate bananas, but she chose both. I personally chose chestnut to fit with the autumn theme.
“It’s amazing that you’re able to eat two.”
“Seed dubs do into abrother starbucks.”
Yuki’s mouth was stuffed with crepes, her cheeks puffed. What she said sounded alien, though I never met an alien myself.
“What are you saying?”
This time, she began to close her mouth, and chew carefully. However, she seemed reluctant as she slowly swallowed the crepes, and with cream still on the side of her lips, she emphasized once again,
“Sweets do go into another stomach.”
“Yuki, you got cream on your lips.
“Ah, sorry. This side?”
“The other.”
“This side huh?”
Yuki tried wiping hard with her palm, but she did not wipe the cream.
“Hold on.”
I took a piece of pocket tissue, and wiped her mouth. She let me do so without resistance, but she was always eyeing more the next opportunity to take a bite. I had to remind her “It’s not off yet. Wait.” Seriously, girls are such creatures. I do like sweets myself, but their passionate easily exceeds the like I have.
“Alright, done..”
“Thanks, Yoshi-kun. You’re well prepared..”
“It’s fine, just a tissue. I think high school students normally have them around.”
“I’m almost 17, but I never brought any before.”
“So you’re older than me by a year, Yuki?”
“Yes. I’m your senior, so you have to respect me.”
“There’s no respect to speak of when you still have cream on your mouth.”
“You’re lying! There’s still more.?”

I saw Yuki rub her mouth flusteredly, and chuckled. Her white skin reddened slightly, probably because she panicked and rubbed too hard. Even the cheeks, which were not rubbed, were a little red.
“Kuku, it’s gone..”
“Uu. You’re so mean, Yoshi-kun. Really mean..”
Yuki pouted as she walked before me.
She had a slender back, fluffy hair, and thin legs reaching out from her skirt. I tailed Yuki from a little distance, wanting to eye them a little more.
But Yuki went straight for the library, and began to marvel at the exhibits of the photography club, and I had to chase after her in an instant.
We marvelled at the many monochrome photos lined together—talking about the work we both liked.
I chose a photo of a man jumping on a beach, while Yuki chose a photo of a girl alone on the shopping street.
The lonely girl was cut away from the vast world, looking so helpless. It’s definitely a nice picture wanting to convey something, but it didn’t match my impression of Yuki. I thought she’ll be like me, and would choose a photo filled with life.
“Really?”
Yuki’s soft voice in the library sparsely filled with people.
“But this is definitely me.”
We went to the arts club store, bought a few doujins, and read them together while next to each other. Our tastes in novels are similar, and we like the same works.
Then, Yuki noticed something, and approached it without hesitation. Before I realized, we’re at furthest end of the school, far away from the noise.
There’s an old building deep inside, and Yuki eyed at the building that appeared to be secretly built, muttering, “what’s that building for?”
The originally white building had changed colors due to the many years of weathering, and on the walls, there were plants whose names I didn’t know of. The green stuff’s probably moss. Anyway, the building such seem so unapproachable.
I wanted to call for Yuki to return, but at this moment,
“Ah, the boy there. Hold on a moment.”
I was called out by this slightly familiar voice, by this familiar sounding line.
Even after a long time, I could recognize that muscular body.
He had a messy 3 days stubble, his hair was tied behind his head, and he was showing childish, dazzling eyes between his long bangs.
It’s been at least a year since we met, but he’s the same as usual.
It’s the director.
The director of the movie we’re going to see today.
And the person who gave me these two tickets.
❀
I first met the director in winter break, while I was still in middle school.

Club activities were suspended, and I was alone, with nothing to do, so I went strolling in the park nearby.
There would be many visitors at the park during the vacation and the evening, but it's very quiet on a normal workday. It made me a little lonely.
Breaking this silence was an exceptionally gruff voice.
"Ah, the boy there. Hold on a moment."
"Eh?"
I was called out, and turned to the voice. I saw a muscular uncle running towards me. I could hear the frantic sound effects of a person running. I knew he was in a fix, so I stopped without thinking——that was a wrong choice.
That man was huffing so hard, he was almost dying. He went behind me, and suddenly grabbed me by the elbow.
"Ahh——I'm saved. Please come along with us."
"Wh-what's going on?
"We're filming a movie, but we don't have enough actors at the last moment. It's causing us lots of trouble."
"No no no, hold on. I don't get what you mean."
"Don't get, what I mean?"
The uncle turned towards me with bewilderment. I had a closeup look of his face, and found him to be still somewhat young. He's probably in his twenties, at the phase when I'm still somewhat able to call him a big brother.
"I don't."
"So I say, you'll be a temporary actor for a movie."
"That's not what I don't understand. I'm saying that I don't know why I have to come along with you."
"Didn't I just say why? If you don't come along, I'll be in real trouble.."
"…Huh?"
"That's how it is. Let's go."
"No, I say,"
Just like that, I was dragged off by him.
Everything I said thereafter was a waste of effort. There was an overwhelming difference in strength, and no matter how I resisted, I couldn't escape. Three minutes into my struggle, I gave up.
I was left at his whim, either to be roasted or fried.
It appeared the man who called me was the director of this work, called the director. He showed a different expression from what I had seen, the aura around him changing drastically. I felt really annoyed to think that he was a little cool.
The filming scene was at the bench in the park.
I was assigned the role of passer-by A.
All I had to do was to follow behind the protagonist. I had no lines or actions. Even so, I was instructed to do a series of actions, where I should look at what time, how fast I should be walking.

We were filming a single scene, so I carelessly thought I could go home once I was done, but the reality was that I was caught in a four hour deadlock, due to the many retakes.
The sky was dark blue when they started collecting the equipment. In another 10 minutes or so, the world will be plunged into darkness, more even in a blink of an eye. See, night is coming.
“So you’re here. Good work there..”
I looked towards the voice and found the director walking towards me. It seemed he had been looking for me for quite a while.
“It’s a lot of time.”
“You really helped me out. Well, you only appeared for like 10 seconds or so, but I really didn’t want to compromise on the quality, so I dragged it out. Oh yeah, this is for you. As a gift of thanks.”
Saying that, the director took out a can of corn soup. The weather’s cold after the sunset, so I accepted gratefully. The soup’s still warm. As I held the can with both hands, I felt the warmth spreading in my palms.
“Thank you very much.”
“Also, these tickets are for you. There’ll be a public screening during the culture festival next Autumn, so do come by to watch”
“Next year? Not this year?”
“The production’s probably won’t be finished this year. Once this is done next year, I’ll be graduating.”
The rectangular color paper had the words “60th Akiho Festival Movie Screening Ticket”. The ‘59th had two strikethroughs over them, and the ‘60th’ written above were larger than the other words, as though conveying the director’s determination.
By the side of the words was the name of the university and the crest. The rectangular red words ‘Yasaka University’ were a little blurry. I did hear of rumors about the school, like it’s built on a demonic slope or something.
“But there are two tickets..”
“It’s a romance film. If you have a girl you like, invite her along..”
Just like this, I had two tickets and a can of corn soup. It’s a cheap payout compared to the four hours of work. But well, it’s a valuable experience, so whatever.
I saw the director wave as he left with his back facing me, drinking the soup. For this cat-tongued me, the warm soup was just right. It flowed past my throat, and immediately after, I felt a gentle warmness spreading through my belly.
The brightest star was sparkling in the sky.
It seemed to be the leading star.
So I started walking towards the little light of Venus.
❀
“You’re here, boy.”
The director called for us, his muscular body taking up two thirds of the bench or so. There were a dozen or so tickets messily laid out on the table,

along with a promotional pamphlet for the Akiho Festival, and so. There's a movie magazine, probably flipped through lots of times as the actress' face on the cover was disfigured.
"It's been a while. Is the movie airing here?"
"Yeah. The innermost room of this clubroom building is our clubroom. It's on the second floor. Hm?"
At this moment, the director finally noticed Yuki, it seemed. Like a man possessed, he sized her up several times. Then, he averted his eyes, and called out to me.
"Boy, a word."
"Huh?"
I went towards the director as he said, and he dragged me to the end of the building.
We're some distance away from Yuki, so even at normal volume, our voices probably wouldn't reach her. However, "What's with that girl? Isn't she super cute?" the director whispered softer than a mosquito.
"What's her relationship with you?"
"Friends, I guess. She seems like she wants to see this movie no matter what. I didn't know when she got wind of me having two tickets, so I brought her along."
"A fan of mine?"
The director eyed sideways, smirking.
"Guess not. I heard that she promised someone that she'll see this movie."
I had enough of the director's leery face, so I had to insistently deny.
"With who?"
"Who knows?"
Both of us looked towards Yuki in unison.
Yuki was flipping through the magazine on the bench. She's probably not reading, just flipping through. Probably enjoying the feeling of paper and the sound.
"She's like a painting."
The director marvelled as he appraised her, muttering,
"Such girls are rare. She's not just cute or pretty, she has a certain charm that attracts attention. It's a really rare thin. So boy, might negotiating for her to appear in a movie?"
"I'm not going to. Can't you just ask her yourself?"
"Well, after all,"
What do you mean, after all?"
"…I'll be hurt if such a cute girl rejects me."
"Huh?"
I really, seriously did show an outraged look.
Hold on a moment. What's this guy saying? And what happened to the crazy guy who dragged me away that year?
"Aren't guys such creatures? We become weak in the face of beauties."
"Why are you saying it like it's a motto?"

I couldn’t help but retort, and the large eyes of the director stared at me intently.
“You’ve changed, boy.”
“Eh? Really?”
“Yeah, you’ve changed. The old you, well, how do I put it? Easy to deal with. It’s like if I begged you, you’ll agree to do anything. You’re a little different now. You’re able to express yourself..”
“Is that a good thing?”
“That’s definitely a good thing. Those that go with the flow can’t catch anything. If you want something, you need to grab it with your hands, even if it’s by force. That’s how it is, so please. I’ll get down on my knees and beg if you continue to refuse. But you’re just going to refuse me again, so.”
Why be so forceful to me? Can’t you do that to Yuki?
Well, I’m a guy. Can’t say that I don’t understand what the director’s feeling.
“Well, so be it. I’ll introduce her to you, but you will have to ask her yourself.”
“Tch, got it.”
“Yuki.”
I called for Yuki’s name, and she closed the magazine, her body swaying side by side as she approached us.
“Finished whispering?”
“Yeah, basically, he gave me the tickets, and he’s the director of this movie we’re going to see. Seems like he wants to ask for something from you.”
“Ask me?”
“Speak up, director.”
“Oh, yeah.”
I nudged hard at his large back.
It’s like a rock, hard, solid, and unmoving. Even so, my little nudge might have motivated him to move forward.
“Th-th-thank you very much for coming to see this movie today!”
“Yes. I’m looking forward to today’s movie.”
Yuki smiled, and the director blushed, his body shaking. He’s already at his mental limit, huh? Never expected that.
Feeling that he was helpless, I was about to speak up for the director, only for him to tsay,
“And erm, erm, if it’s okay, can I get you to act in my movie next time?”
He reached his massive hand out towards Yuki.
“Please?”
“Uh huh.”
“No can do?”
“Uh huh.”
“So is it a yes?”
Yuki smiled impishly.
“Anyway, I can decide after watching the movie, right?”

That was the smile of a little devil.
There were twelve chairs in the room large enough for twenty. Four chairs a row, three rows. We were seated at the second row, and the chairs were wobbly, probably because the floor was old. Other than us, there were another three people. When the movie began screening, the lights in the room were switched off.
Then, aired on the screen commonly used during lessons was a visual.
The movie depicts a typical daily life, the encounter of a boy and a girl, their breakup, and their encounter again. It was simply a common story.
There was no alien invasion, no monster destroying the world. The world was't in any crisis, but there was clearly something in the movie.
The scene I appeared in was the important one, when the duo , after having a huge argument, regretted their actions, and reunited at the bench in the park. I was far into the background, but I realized it was me, just passing by.
Yuki might have noticed my appearance, and she poked at my flank.
I grabbed her mischievous finger, and glanced towards her discreetly.
Yuki, next to me, next looked towards me, her eyes staring at the screen, looking really serious.
It's pretty rude per se, but it's just an amateur movie for a culture festival, not something meant to be watched so seriously. Why's she being that serious?
In the darkness, her sidelong face brightened by the movie lights looked really beautiful. For the last five minutes, I was just staring at her, mesmerized.
We arrived at the bus stop at the main entrance , only to see it turn around a corner. The red taillights slowly got smaller, and finally vanished.
It seemed the next ride would arrive 10 minutes later.
I was seated alongside Yuki, on the plastic seats. We were the only ones here.
"Yoshi-kun, the movie really left me nervous."
Yuki beamed, "But the movie's really interesting.", so she said.
"The part where the protagonist confessed was really good. I want to be confessed passionately like that for once.."
Yuki delightedly told me what she thought, but I never listened to them.
There's one thing I was more interested in than the review, and I kept thinking about it. Should I ask? Or not? After much deliberation, I couldn't help but ask.
"In that case, why did you refuse the director?"
It happened at least ten minutes ago.
The director had been outside the room, waiting for our exit.
"How's the movie?"
"Yes, it's really nice."
"Really?"

He probably felt nervous before getting this answer, and he heaved a huge sigh of relief. I'm guessing he's clenching his right fist in victory, the smile on his face dazzling.
Yuki too nodded with a smile.
"I guess the miracle never happened after all." So she said.
"So as promised, I think I shall refuse."
"Eh?"
Both I, who was next to her, and the smiling director never understood what Yuki was saying, and neither did we remember the reason for her saying so.
From our faces, she probably understood what we were thinking.
Yuki repeated herself, emphasizing that there's no mistake on anyone's part,
"Sorry, I can't appear in your movie."
She bowed, and hastily left the club building.
I looked back and forth between Yuki's back and the dumbfounded director, and finally bowed towards the director as Yuki had done, before giving chase after her.
❀
"Because I promised." So Yuki answered my answer.
"Hey, Yoshi-kun, do you think there's a scene that looks out of sorts?"
"…No."
"In that case, I shouldn't appear in the movie. It's a promise after all."
"I don't get what you mean at all. Who did you make a promise with, and what's the promise?"
Yuki's eyes looked towards the slightly worn out tips of her red shoes. They touched and broke away like over and over again, like a kiss.
"Anyway, now that we're talking about this, I'll ask again, Yuki? Who did you promise to watch this movie with?"
Yuki took a deep breath, and breathed out towards the sky. She stopped her shaking legs, and stood up.
I immediately looked up towards her without thinking. Her back was facing the setting sun, so I couldn't tell what expression she was making.
"We made a promise that existed nowhere. Nowhere in the past, present or future."
"What's going on? You had a promise, didn't you, Yuki?"
"I did, but it no longer exists. Even the part about us making that promise never existed."
"I don't really get you, but in that case, it's fine for you not to go with the promise, right?"
"No. that's because it's still very important to me."
There was clearly something in Yuki's voice, something stubborn. It's not something I could settle just because I want to, and that's the only thing I got.
Finally, the bus arrived.

Nn, Yuki reached her hand towards me, and I did my best to hold it as gently as possible, standing up from the seat. Her hand was delicate, cold, weak and fleeting. It's so weak that if I exerted a little too much strength, I might break it.
"If possible, can I meet you tomorrow?"
"Will have to be after school though, if you're fine with that."
"Of course."
"See you tomorrow then."
So we promised.
We made a promise that really existed on this world.
We were together the next day, and the following day.
We visited the bookstore, and studied at the library.
Yuki's great at studies, and patiently explained the solutions to the questions I couldn't solve.
Before I knew it, a week passed from the moment I met Yuki.
"You're a good kid, Yoshi-kun."
"Look, even if you say that, I'm not treating you to tea.."
As thanks for having her check my work, I bought a meat bun for her at the convenience store.
"Tch, you're not treating me?"
Yuki clumsily sang, "it's cold, it's cold." And we walked down the town while the lights started to brighten. "I'm scared of the cold." So she said as she rubbed her little hands, breathing out on her fingertips. Winter was coming, and surely the tomorrow would be colder than this day.
We passed by the post office, and arrived at a place a little distant from the station. With a gentle, correcting tone, Yuki said .
"Hey, Yoshi-kun. You shouldn't be too trusting of me, you know?"
"Why?"
"Because I want to do something cruel to you."
Saying that, Yuki shook her head. She closed her eyes hard, and three seconds passed. She opened her eyes again, and there was a mysterious glint to them. What's that? Confusion? Fear? Rage? Rugged determination? Finally, that light too vanished.
"No. It's nothing. Forget about it."
Yuki ran towards me, step by step, trying to hide her face, it seemed.
"Can we meet again tomorrow?"
It feels like Yuki will vanish, so I shouted at her back.
At that moment, Yuki quickly turned towards me. Her skirt fluttered slightly due to the turn, Her hair rose slightly, and she appeared to be dancing. Just like the day when we first met, my heart pounded tremendously, so much that it was aching.
"Ehehe. It's the first you you started a promise with me, Yoshi-kun."
"If that'll make you happy, I'll keep inviting you starting tomorrow."
"Really?"
"I promise you."

“I’m happy.”
Like before, I bade farewell with Yuki before the train station.
She waved hard at me, so hard that I was worried if her arm would rip off. I waved hard at her in response. The distance between was was increasing, little by little.
After some distance, Yuki put her hand down, and shouted my name,
“Yoshi-kun.”
At that moment, my body froze.
Yuki’s expression changed, and I had the impression that her smile was a lie. At the same time, she muttered something.
That delightful voice was immediately buried in the noise, and did not reach my ears.
But through the movements of her lips, I understood what she said.
At the last moment, Yuki said with an anguished look.
“——Liar.”

Contact.33

夏の、一番暑い日

Chapter 2: Contact.92 – The Hottest Day in the Summer

“You’re really working hard.”
A girl I never knew of spoke to me.
It happened after I did five 100m sprints on the track.
It was a gentle, sweet voice, akin to the evening when the heat had just subsided.
As I had just finished a sprint, I was gasping for breath, unable to respond to her words. The girl approached me, and handed me a towel. I instinctively grabbed it, but can I really use it? I scented upon the sweet smell of the softener, and hesitated.
“You’re not wiping your sweat off?”
She asked while I remained silent, tilting her head cutely. Her hair was on her face, looking a little itchy. The tip of her pretty index finger stroked down her soft face, putting the fine hair behind her .
“Can I?”
“Of course. I’m giving it to you for this reason.”
The girl smiled, looking bemused, and it made her look a lot more immature. Maybe it’s because the atmosphere around her had lightened up a little.
All the concerns in my heart immediately vanished, and the tension in my shoulders eased.
But even so, my heart was moving a little faster than usual.
Whenever I finished running, I would be panting, feeling unbearable, my heart aching in pain. I experienced this feeling hundreds, thousands of times ever since I joined the track team. But why? Why does this racing heartbeat seem a little different, weird from before?
But I didn’t know what exactly was different, in what way.
This thing…seemed to be called ambiguity.
“I’ll use it then. Thanks.”
“Please do,” so the girl said.
“I’m Yuki Shiina. Nice to meet you”
“Huh? Nice to meet you. I’m Haruyoshi Segawa.”
I gave my name, “Haruyoshi, Haruyoshi.” And Shiina-san muttered my name.
“Alright, I’ll call you Yoshi-kun.”
So she suddenly declared.
“Not Haru or something like that?”
“You don’t like it?”
“Not that you can’t, but I never had anyone call me that before. Just a little shocked to hear it.”
“If nobody called you that, isn’t it better? This is my personal way of addressing you. Oh yes, just call me Yuki.”

“Yuki-san?””
“Leave the ‘-san’. Just call me ‘Yuki’.”
“Alright then, Yuki. I got something to ask.”
Once I said that, Yuki looked away from me, and towards the guys from the soccer club. Seemed like she noticed them ogling at her.
“What is it?”
“You’re not from our school, right?”
“…You figured it out, huh?”
The soccer club guys were spotted by her, and panicked as they returned to practice. “Pass! Yes! Run! Yes! Minigame! Yes.” Loud voices echoed from the field.
“Are they your friends, Yoshi-kun?”
“More like juniors, I guess. We never interact though. I’m from the track team, and those in the soccer team on good terms with me are all retired. I’m a third year after all.”
They’re probably in an air-conditioned room, cramming through the words on the textbooks, and not soccer. For us third years, the term ‘exam candidates’ really was annoying.
It was the middle of summer vacation.
The intense sunlight of the summer day dyed everything white, and I was unable to open my eyes.
The soft cream-like clouds were drifting forward.
Due to the heat, the field appeared to be floating, unsteady.
The cricket voices heard from nowhere made it sound hot and unbearable.
“So?”
“So what?”
“How did you know I’m not a student from this school?”
“Ah, it’s simple. I had no impression of you.”
“Yoshi-kun, are you able to remember the faces of everyone in school?”
Yuki was really shocked. Of course, I couldn’t possibly remember all the students’ faces.
There were many students I didn’t know, let alone the entire school.
However, there’s no doubt I knew Yuki’s not a student’s of this school.
It’s simple.
She had white skin, wavy hair as fluffy as cotton candy, raised eyebrows, large, deep looking black eyes. She’s pretty special compared to all the other girls I met.
If there’s such a girl in school, there would be a huge commotion the moment she first came to school.
Picking out cute girls in the school is a necessary subject for all the boys, including me.
But I couldn’t say this reason so blatantly in front of her. “Sorta” I tried to dodge the subject.
“Hm, I failed. I even dressed up as a student in our school too.”
“Relax, I’m not telling the teacher.”

Yuki kicked lighting at a stone by her feet, and it bounced off, landing 2m away from us. She wasn't exactly going over to kick the stone..
"No, that's not what I'm getting at. More or less, I think I'll be a little happier if you think of me as a classmate, Yoshi-kun?"
"What do you mean?"
"I see. So you don't know."
Soon after, the 3pm bell rang.
"It's about time to start running soon, right?"
Yuki held an end of the towel wrapped around my neck, and pulled it away. My neck was a little cold without it.
"I'll wash it and return it to you."
"It's fine. Don't worry."
Yuki waved, basically telling me, "Go on". I couldn't ask any more, so I thanked her, and returned to the starting line.
I stood at the starting line, and took a deep breath. Before my eyes was a shadow cut out with a shaver, clinging to the ground. I glared at the guy. No matter how hard I tried to sprint, this guy's always easily making it just before me. I could never catch up to it. It's like a nightmare. Even so, why am I running?
"Hey."
And before I knew it, Yuki, who wisely went to the shade under the tree, said.
"The third years in the track team should be retiring soon. Why are you still running, Yoshi-kun?"
She had practically read my mind.
I didn't answer, and merely smiled as I placed my hand gently on the starting line, crouching down as I prepared to sprint. The ground had amply absorbed the heat from the sun, nearly burning my skin, and my fingers felt a burning sensation. Ready. So I quietly noted. BAM. I exerted strength in my legs, and started sprinting.
It happened during the summer of my third year in middle school.
Thus, I encountered Yuki Shiina.
❀
Initially, I didn't like running .
I could get second or third elementary school, I got seconds and thirds during the sports festival. I guess I should be proud to be second to a really fast guy, but the ones sprinting at the sports festival were all similar to me in speed. Results wise, it's all a matter of ability.
And the reason why I joined the track team was because I met a classmate called Takeshita.
Right after I entered middle school, we switched seats for the first time, and Takeshita sat next to me, dressed in the same uniform I was unfamiliar with.
"Are we seriously wearing this every day starting today? Isn't this hell?"

I truly understood the discomfort of having my neck touch the shirt collar, along with the urge to scratch away the itch.
For us, who had been wearing comfy, practical clothes that's easy to move in over the past few weeks, this uniform's too heavy and uncomfortable, and also strangely shameful.
"Yeah. Really want to get rid of this as soon as possible"
I agreed, "Oh." Takeshita widened his eyes, before beaming with an earnest smile.
I had been a student for six years, and to a certain extent, I got the feeling, "Yep, looks like I can be friends with this guy."
"Please take care of me". I said to Takeshita, and held his outstretched hand.
Takeshita had been part of the track team since elementary school. He's usually quiet, but when it comes to club acitivies, he got really excited.
For example, he would talk about how he beat his rivals in the last competition, the memories of summer camp, the harsh winter training as he hated the cold and loved the heat, that there were many seniors he was familiar with.
Personally, I had no interest in athletics, but I was invited by Takeshita once to watch the track team.
Takeshita's really fast.
In a 100m sprint, not even the third years could beat him.
The way he sprinted, nobody would think of him as the guy who got an unbelievable 13 points in the language test. His running self was a far cry from the guy who till an hour ago was trying to figure out how to destroy his answer script, not the guy who spouted such nonsense. "It's stupid to just burn it though."
He was really cool when he ran. Really cool.
The next day, Takeshita happily took the track team's application form to me.
"That's a lot more fun than you imagined, right?" Takeshita seemed a little proud when he said that.
"Yeah." I nodded. It's too embarrassing to say the real reason though. Well, we're all guys. There's no need to say everything.
In our freshmen contest, I did terribily, while Takeshita took first on the podium. He kept winning, and passed the local preliminaries as a first, even making it to the finals in the prefecture competition.
There were many competitors like Takeshita in the finals, and he really had little chance of winning to begin with, the results had many looking forward to his performances next year, or the year after. "Well, guess that's how it is." I remembered him saying that with a dumb smile, and the seniors cheering him on appeared a lot more unhappy.
On the day the third years retired, most of them directed their words to Takeshita. "Do your best." "You'lll definitely make it to the Nationals."

While the seniors cheered him on with tears in their eyes, “I will.” it appeared Takeshita nodded seriously.
But soon after the second semester started, Takeshita easily quit the track team.
Takeshita never had much interest in track to begin with.
His objective was the senior two years older than he was, who graduated from the same elementary school.
Takeshita liked her.
But the outcome was that his love didn’t bear frtuit.
At the end of the retirement ceremony, the senior Takeshita liked announced that she was dating the vice captain.
The first year Takeshita, the fastest in our team, lost to the third year senior who was the slowest. Ah, yeah. He lost. Even so, he was just smiling dumbfoundedly. “Congrats.” He said with a trembling voice. Thinking back, he probably was trembling with such a voice when he lost in the prefectures finals.
Even till now, I don’t know why I was so emotional. I just couldn’t forgive him however.
“Hey Takeshita. Are you fine with that? You didn’t fight it out against him?”
Takeshita merely laughed in a silly manner.
“Are you just going to keep losing?”
I was really anxious, and yelled.
The shocked classmates around us gave me weird looks, whispering things.
Back then, I ignored everything I would have usually listened to. Those were just noises. What I really wanted to hear wasn’t that. I wanted to hear the true thoughts of that classmate, that buddy on the team.
But Takeshita just gave a dumb smile, and left without a doubt.
I could no longer find the Takeshita I once admired. Left there was the same back of the guy who got 13 points in the exam. That’s not the silhouette of a winner, but a loser.
Ever since then, two years passed.
I continued to work hard on the track team. I supposed I was working hard.
I wasted two whole years, and finally arrived at the place Takeshita ran at during his first year. Like the guy I once admired, I put my fingers on the starting line. The fingertips turned red as they withstood my body weight.
The gun was fired, I stomped hard off the ground, and sprinted off.
I did my best to run.
And I had no regrets about my defeat.
As an ordinary guy, I made it to the finals of the prefecture. Isn’t this enough. Ah, yeah. It’s enough. But why did I feel so hollow inside?
I felt like I was going to be out of breath. The endless sweat slid down my cheeks and neck. The strong sunlight caused me to be unable to open my eyes. I took a deep breath of the scorching air, and looked at the time.
That was the best I ever ran.
That was the shortest time I took.

But it was still 0.1 second slower compared to Takeshita’s best.
❀
The next day, and the day after, Yuki looked for me. She was often holding a sports drink or ice cream.
I was supposed to ask my juniors to handle the stopwatch, but before I knew it, it ended up in Yuki’s hands.
“Ready—”
Yuki called.
I gathered my strength in my legs.
“Bang!”
At that moment, I started running immediately.
The start seemed good. My forward leaning body slowly rose. My body felt light, and my legs could take large strides forward. The impact of my feet on the ground sent my body forward, my arms swinging. Yuki appeared to be increasingly bigger. I felt a painful, burning sensation on several points on my body.
I continued to take short breaths, inhaling the oxygen into my lungs.
I gritted my teeth.
I stared at the shadow before me, and gave chase.
The moment I dashed past Yuki, I heard a little ’beep’.
It’s from the other side of the finish line.
Did I make it to where I want to be?
I slowed down little by little, and stopped, my hands on my knees as I held my body up. I felt moisture seeping all over my pores. Ah damn it, it’s tiring.
“Haa, haa, haa. Ho-how is it?”
“Didn’t break your best record. Just a little more.”
“Ah—not good enough.”
I had no strength to stand, so I collapsed to the ground. There’s the smell of dirt, a smell unique to the summer, with the blazing sun. Sweat soaked my shirt, and as a result, the dirt’s sticking to my back. Whatever.
The sky’s blue, the world’s white, and the scalding sun’s burning my skin. My body’s yearning for oxygen, gasping for breath, and my heart’s beating wildly. My chest expanded, contracted, and expanded again. I felt worn out. My body and soul seemed to be separated.
“It’s hot.”
The moment I said these words, a shadow covered my face.
“Good work. Have a little rest.”
It’s Yuki.
She was holding PET bottles, one containing an isotonic drink and tea. She asked for my preference, and I chose the former. I thanked her, sat upright, and held the PET bottle.
Thank goodness she uncapped it, and I was able to drink it immediately. I gulped down about half of it at one go.

Yuki made sure not to sit down as she knelt on the ground, helping me cap and uncap the bottle. She narrowed her eyes, as though looking at the sun, and said,
“Smells like a boy.”
I brought the PET bottle to my lips once again, and this time, I drank it slowly. My throat throbbed greatly. The cy liquid flowed into my body.
“You’re lying on the ground? You don’t care about your clothes or hair getting dirty.”
“Well, of course I don’t really care about that.”
“Isn’t this obvious?”
“You find it dirty?”
“That’s fine, isn’t it? I think it’s pretty cool.”
I started to recall the morning weather report, when the big sister reported that it’ll be hotter than yesterday, or something. After finishing the drink, I stood up.
“I’ll go wash my face. Go rest in the shade, Yuki.”
For some reason, my throat felt thirstier than before.
I went to a sink in the courtyard, where fewer people were at.
Using the faucet, I washed my head to cool myself off. My head’s heavier after my hair got wet, but I felt a lot more refreshed compared to before. I then quickly washed my face, the sweat filled water entering my mouth. It tasted a little salty. I gargled, spat the water out, and left the place.
I lifted my wet, bundled hair, and rested a little in the shadow of the classroom block. “Haa.” I let out a long sigh.
I leaned my back on the wall, and closed my eyes, my mind recalling Yuki’s smile. “I think it’s pretty cool.” Her voice echoed countless times. Each time, my heart would feel happy, and at the same time, anguished.
I should be focusing on running. What’s going on?
It was the first time I experienced such feelings. Even at this point, my face’s scalding.
After a while, I opened my eyes, and saw a familiar face pass before me. The person’s giving a very gloomy look, though I might say that’s just compared to her usual look. She’s the most famous person in school who really performed during the summer competitions.
It’s Akane Rindou of the swimming team.
“Eh, Akane? What are you doing here?”
The moment Akane heard my voice and noticed my presence, her expression changed faster than the turning of a page. The gloomy face from before was buried deep within her heart, and she was showing her usual cheery face.
“Hm? Ah, it’s you, Haru. I’m resting. I left something in the classroom. Going over to pick it up now.”
“Nyahahaha.” So she laughed, but well, it’s obviously a lie. There was no way she could be headed to the classroom block in that getup.
She’s wearing only a school swimsuit.

Functionality and design wise, it was the worst design ever. No matter the gender, nobody liked these swimsuits. The cyan colored swimsuits turn black after absorbing water. She was soaking wet all over her hair and body, and clearly she had not dried herself with a towel. Her short hair gathered a little bit of water, and the water droplets fell, gliding down the skin receiving them, before landing on the ground.
“Something happened?”
“…No. It’s nothing.”
“I see. Well, if anything happens, give me a shoutout. I can hear you out a little at least. Anyway, what’s with that face?”
“I’m a little shocked.” Akane said.
“Never thought I would hear such words from you, Haru.”
Really, these might not sound like what I would usually say.
“It’s summer after all. I do feel a little weird myself. No, sorry, better to forget about it.”
“No need to be so embarrassed. But well, guess you’re right. I’ll just say what I want then.”
Akane changed her direction, and went to my side.
It was an inexplicable distance that was within my grasp, yet not one I could reach just by stretching my hand out. At the same time, I could smell salts from Akane, no, the smell of the swimming pool.
Akane, leaning on the wall in the same posture as me, sighed as well. Ah, it’s so cold. She muttered to herself, and took a deep breath. I thought she would say something, but the silence continued for a while.
The sound of some wind instruments came from somewhere. I looked around, and found two girls at the window on the second floor corridor, blowing trumpets. The sounds from the high pitched trumpets drifted towards the lust greenery of the summer.
Once the performance ended, Akane spoke up.
“Well actually, I can’t really say that something happened. I just can’t bring out the motivation I had before. When I made the Nationals in the last tournament, I made a new personal best, and just feel a little burned out. Just today, the teacher asked me to guide the juniors, but I …”
Can’t swim like before.
Her voice trailed off at the end, almost inaudible.
Akane expressed herself. “it’s fine.” And I muttered. I knew that Akane was looking at me, but I was looking at those two from the wind instrument club. There’s no encore yet.
“Because well, aren’t you still swimming, Akane?”
“Swimming’s a habit of mine, like toothbrushing. I feel a little uneasy if I don’t swim.”
“Right. So the light’s still there. It may become smaller, harder to see, but it’s not put out. I’ll say this as many times as I need. There’s no doubt you can go to a further place, Akane.”
Akane’s different from Takeshita and I.

She’s swimming for real.
Though I didn’t say out the last two lines.
“…Feels like you’ve changed, Haru.”
“How so?” so I asked. “Back then, you wouldn’t say such things.” So she replied.
“If it were the old you, Haru, there’s no way you would have greeted me if I haven’t noticed you. I don’t know how many times I’ve been ignored by you. Even with everyone around, you would just stand by the side and watch everyone. You would then give some ambiguous lines with some really fake smile. That was different though. I know. These were your true thoughts, Haru. This might be the first time you’re saying what you really feel. So, hm hmm…I’m a little happy.”
“It’s the summer fault. It’s so hot out here that I’m not thinking straight and saying weird stuff. Sorry.”
“I say, you don’t have to be so embarrassed. Hm. But, yay! Since you say so, Haru, I’ll just give it a try. Ah yeah. Can I ask you for something this time?”
“If it’s something within my capabilities.”
“Do you mind saying ‘do your best’? I’m actually a simple person. If I’m cheered on, I might be able to work a little harder.”
“That’s it? Hasn’t everyone else said that to you many times?”
“No, that’s different. Say it to me. Please!”
“Got it. Do your best.”
Akane closed her eyes, seemingly trying to focus as she listened.
“Yes.”
“Do your best.”
“Yes.”
“Do your best, Akane.”
“Yep, I’ll do my best.”
Akane slowly opened her eyes, being the genuinely popular person around. Cheerful, kind, a little clumsy, and very honest. She’s as dazzling as the summer sun.
Looking at her, I couldn’t help but narrow my eyes.
Then, Akane, who arrived by my left, turned around me and returned to where she came from.
The moment her silhouette grew smaller, for some reason, she turned towards me again. She walked out of the shade, and stood in the intense light. The water droplets all over her reflected the sunlight, and she looked really dazzling.
“Yep, I’ll do my best too.”
Then, she raised a fist towards me.
“So do your best too, Haru.”
“Ah, I see.”
So I muttered.
Guess I really have to.
I felt a little itch within my heart, yet it felt so comfortable.

“What’s the matter?”
“Nothing. Just that I guess I really have to do my best.”
Hearing my reply, Akane’s cheeks turned a little red as she said gleefully, “Isn’t that right?”
The conversation I had with Akane finally allowed me to regain some composure. I returned to the field, and that calm vanished in an instant.
Yuki was waiting under a tree by the field.
She was talking to someone.
That boy had slightly long hair, and looked pretty cool. He’s wearing the soccer team jersey, and if I remembered correctly, the name’s Sawachika.
Three months ago, my classmate Satake proudly boasted that a really fast winger joined them.
Some distance away from the duo were a few guys from the soccer team, spying on them. Once one of them spotted me, they scattered in a panic.
I got a rough idea of what’s going on. It seemed Yuki was being wooed.
Well, it’s not strange for her to be wooed, since she’s just standing there, looking beautiful.
If this is really the case, what should I do? What’s the right thing to do?
Suddenly, I realized.
What did I try to do?
Even I found it stupid to think of such a question.
Guess I was really acting weird due to the heat. It’s really unlike me, but well, it’s not a bad thing. Not a bad thing at all.
I approached the duo while they were still talking. Yuki noticed me, and scuttled towards me?
“What’s wrong?”
“Just a little trouble.”
While we were talking, Sawachika approached. Yuki saw him, and ducked behind me. I in turn took a step forward.
The moment I did so, Sawachika seemed hesitant, and swallowed his words.
No, that was all he could do.
For us sports club members, seniors are revered like Gods. Sawachika did in fact approach Yuki when I was not around. He probably waited for this opportunity.
With a kind smile on my face, I said to Sawachika.
“I think you’re called Sawachika, right? I guess club activities aren’t easy after the third years retired? Satake does still pop by from time to time, no?”
I didn’t really care what the conversation was about. I just wanted to let him know of my relationship with their ex-soccer team captain Satake.
Sawachika understood what I was getting at, and while feeling unhappy about it, he bowed towards me politely, and returned to his buddies at the club.
That day, after practice.

Yuki, who until yesterday would disappear when I was in the club changing room, was standing before the door, looking up at the sky. The sun's about to set, and the clouds refracted the orange light, the skies turned the land a blazing red. The diagonal sun extended Yuki's shadow, and compared to the day, her vague, fleeting silhouette gave the impression that she would disappear the moment I looked away from her.
"Hm, what's the matter?"
I said to Yuki, who turned towards me. Her clear hair was sparkling, and her smile was really pretty. It was the first time in my life that I found someone's smile so pretty.
"I want to thank you for getting me out of trouble. Let's go to the convenience store. I'll treat you to ice cream or something."
"No need for that. I didn't do much anyway."
"I'm happy, so I want to thank you. Can't I?"
"Not that you can't."
"Let's go then."
Before I could reply, Yuki turned towards the school gate. I pursued her, and walked alongside her.
Two shadows swayed side by side, but not once did they meet. There was a gap the size of a person between us. I just felt like I was whispering a little as I talked. Why?
"Really, Yuki, you're pretty popular."
"That's not true.□"
"But you were approached by Sawachika today."
"Ah, so he's called Sawachika-kun?"
"You never asked for his name?"
"…I forgot to ask. I guess he came to look for me because of you, Yoshi-kun."
"No, didn't he approach you when I wasn't around?"
"Doesn't seem like it. When I was really alone, nobody actually talked to me. I know I was being watched, but well, that's all, definitely. Yep, I guess I wasn't human back then."
"Alone." So Yuki muttered. Her voice sounded a little forlorn.
That loneliness of hers caused me to feel lonely as well.
"So does that mean you become a monster when I'm not around?"
I made a joke. I didn't care if she was angry, shocked, or took me as a fool. I just wanted her to look anything other than sad. Yes, anything else's fine, anything but that.
I wanted her to forget her sadness and loneliness. At this point, she's not alone, since I was walking next to her.
For a moment, Yuki was flabbergasted. "Ahahaha." And then she burst out laughing.
Her anguish was forgotten, as I had hoped.
"Yeah. I become a monster that spits fire!"

Yuki deliberately widened her mouth, raising her eyebrows “Gyaaa!!!!” she made this sound with her all town. Seriously, there was no intent to destroy a town.
“You’re going to wreck the town?”
“Of course.”
“You’re going to fight the hero?”
“Of course!”
“So, you’ll only become human again when I’m around?”
“Yes…”
“Why?”
Yuki didn’t answer. I continued to ask.
“Why do you become human again only when you’re with me?”
Yuki answered with the same joking tone.
“Because you’re a weirdo, Yoshi-kun.”
“Huh?”
“Because you’re the only one who’ll talk to a weirdo like me.”
“I see.” So I went with the flow, nodding, but thinking back about it, I had no memories of being the one who talked to her. It was Yuki who spoke first as far as I knew.
“Wait, aren’t you the one who first spoke to me, Yuki?”
“Is that so?”
“Think about it. I was practicing back then. You’re the one who told me “You’re really working hard.”.”
“Ah, we’re at the convenience store. Come on, let’s go in.”
“Think about it. I was practicing back then. You’re the one who told me “You’re really working hard.”.”
“Ah, we’re at the convenience store. Come on, let’s go in.”
Before I could finish, Yuki grabbed my arm, and ran off. Our shadows were merged together. For some reason, Yuki’s hand was a little cold, so cold I was worried that it could melt because of my hotter than usual hand.
We bought ice cream at the convenience store, and sat at the shade in the parking lots. I hurriedly removed it from the packaging, and munched on the sugar coating. My teeth broke through, and the sweet ice flowed out. It’s delicious. I munched through the ice, and there was a comforting sound accompanying the nice, chewy feeling.
“Is this really enough? There are some more expensive ones .”
“I like this one.”
“Well, it’s delicious after all.”
It’s evening, and many passed by the convenience store. There’s a big sister taking a dog on a stroll, high school students wearing headphone. The uncle in suit hurrying along was probably returning back to his company. Two youths on bicycles were yelling, pedalling their ways home.
“Seriously, Yoshi-kun.”
Yuki said as she stood beside me, licking the melted ice cream on her hand.

She noticed me watching her, and commented that she really couldn’t eat this ice cream.
I knew Yuki didn’t really mean that, so I waited patiently for her. Soon after, she nibbled on the wooden stick, just as I was.
“Have you ever competed against someone?”
“Eh?”
“Have you ever wanted to beat someone?”
She couldn’t confident,
“You know?”
“Well, I can feel it. I’ve been watching you all the time.”
“All the time?”
“All the time.”
“Ahahaha.” I started laughing to pass the vague statement off. “What are you saying?” but Yuki wasn’t laughing. She was staring intently at me.
The awkward laugh of mine melted in the summer air, slowly fading away, and finally disappeared. I stared towards the tattered tips of my shotes. Suddenly, the tips bent softly. I was a little shocked.Everything in my vision, the world I saw became vague and faltering.
For a moment, for some reason, I started talking about the issue I had intended to hide in my heart all the time.
It was something I had sorted out in my mind countless, and had come to terms with.
Finally, out from my throat, my mouth, came the words, the scattered sequences of unrelated terms—
I had a friend called Takeshita.
About how he was really fast,
That he had a senior he admired,
How that romance ended up going nowhere,
And how he just gave up on track.
My voice was cracking, my body was shaking, my vision wavering. I was just saying out the emotions from my mouth. The parking lots got darker little by little. The hot, sharp emotions took the form of words, and was continuously poking at the softest parts of my inner heart.
How much time passed after I finished what I wanted to say? Two minutes? Three minutes?
“So that’s why you started running.”
Yuki muttered.
“What do you mean?”
“You’re always running hard, Yoshi-kun, but not really fully prepared. That might be because you admire Takeshita-kun too much, and that’s why you’re just a step away from him. Yes, I see. I finally know what I can do.”
I rubbed my face with my palms, and lifted my head. The world was colored in night before I knew it, and there were many blinking little lights behind Yuki, who stood up. She was so pretty, whether it was in the day, evening, or night.

“Hey, just to check, Yoshi-kun, do you really want to surpass Takeshita-kun’s record?”
“I started running because of that guy.”
“You’re not being honest. If you have something you want, say it. If you want to win, say that you want to win.”
“…”
“Come on. Say it.”
“I want to win. I want to beat Takeshita.”
“Right. Good. I’ll get you to beat him.”
Yuki took the stick from my hand, and replaced it with hers. The words ‘You win’ were on it. Guess it’s possible to win this lucky draw after all. It’s the first time I saw it, and I thought for sure it was an urban legend.
“You’re really lucky, Yoshi-kun. It’s like you have a Goddess of luck following you.”
While Yuki was the one saying that, she smiled bashfully. She immediately looked away before me, but as I watched her from behind, I could see her ears redden slightly.
The next day, the sudden downpour meant that I could not go to school. The day after was the same, and the track was terrible; I could not run. Three days after I ate that ice cream, I reunited with Yuki that afternoon.
I finished my warmups, and was jogging around when Yuki showed up like usual. I saw her, and froze. She in turn raised her hand, “Hi” acting like nothing happened.
“Seems like today’s the hottest day of the summer.”
She said.
“No, that’s one thing altogether. What’s with your getup though?”
I pointed at Yuki’s clothing. For some reason, she was wearing our school’s gym clothes. The white clothes were translucent, and I could see the outline and colors of the underwear. I was thinking that I shouldn’t be looking, but I just couldn’t look away from those lines.
“I bought it.”
“So why again?”
“I might dirty my clothes today.”
“No, that’s not what I want to ask. I’m asking why you bought our school’s gym clothes?”
“If I wear this, nobody’s going to suspect my identity if I’m seen.Anyway, are you ready?”
I felt that, well, with things coming to this point, and Yuki looking a little happy, I didn’t bother to retort. I nodded. Thanks to the sudden rain from before, I had ample rest, and I was feeling fine. This was the feeling I had when I broke my record at the Prefectures.
“But can I really beat, Takeshita?”
“Yep. It’s fine. Just run full speed as you do, Yoshi-kun, and believe me. Just watch me. It’s simple, right?”

I tapped my fist towards hers, which reached out to me with confidence for some reason. After that, Yuki went to the finish line, while I went to the starting line.
Like usual, I closed my mind, and within my mind, I kept repeating the best starting method as I extended my leg tendons. I placed my hand on my wildly beating heart. I took a slow breath, and inhaled the summer air into my lungs.
I opened my eyes.
The blue sky and the daylight entered my eyes, along with Yuki standing by the finishing line.
Before I knew it, my heart calmed down.
I positioned myself on the starting line. I got ready to run. Yuki raised her hand. I looked forward.
“Ready——”
The world turned silent.
“Don!”
That was the only sound I could hear.
I started running. It was a perfect start. I maintained a forward posture as I pushed forth, accelerating as I slowly lifted my upper body. The wind blew by, and the scenery changed. I continued to dash forward with a speed I never felt before.
10m passed. 20m passed. Hah. Hah. My front foot latched onto the ground as I leaped forth.
30m passed. 40m passed. I might really be able to make it.
And the moment I ran past 50, like usual, I looked towards the shadow running before me.
It’s the shadow I could never surpass.
I had always been seeing it as Takeshita. But,
“Yooooooossssssshhhhhhiiiiiikkkkkkkkuuuuunnnn. Lift your hhhheeeeaaaaaddddddd!”
Yuki shouted at me.
The world turned silent.
“Don!”
That was the only sound I could hear.
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I had always been seeing it as Takeshita. But,

“Yooooossssssshhhhhhiiiiiikkkkkkkkuuuuunnnn. Lift your hhhheeeeaaaaaddddddd!”
Yuki shouted at me.
She’s probably not used to making such a voice. Her voice seemed to be breaking.
I lifted my head, just as she called out to me. I saw the finishing line. Her face was red as she shouted at me.
“Look forrrrwwwwwwaaaaarrrrddd”
Seriously, erm, what are you doing, Yuki?
I ended up grinning.
“I’m here!”
She waved her arms, shouting.
“Fly over here!!!”
Then Yuki exclaimed, “Just trust me, just look at me.”
So I trusted Yuki.
I just looked at her.
Ah, yeah. It’s just that simple. Because—
For every step I took, so Yuki was closer to me by a step. I wanted to be faster…I wanted to get towards Yuki faster. Even if it was just a second faster, a moment, I wanted to be faster.
Yuki’s at the center of the world.
There’s nothing else.
One step, two steps, three steps. I definitely couldn’t slow down. More importantly, I had to be faster.
On the last step, I stepped hard onto the ground, and as Yuki said, I leapt into her open arms. It’s summer, but I scented upon the sweet fragrance of spring. It’s the fragrance of the cherry blossoms.
At that moment, I heard a ‘beep’, and at the same time, the world revolved.
Eh? All that was left was the dumbfounded sound echoing in my mind.
And before I knew it, I was lying on the ground, face up. Yuki’s hands were on my neck, herself on my body. It was likely that the moment I was about to crash into her, she pined me down below.
“It hurts—”
The impact should have hit my back, but I was aching all over. I coughed, and had difficulty breathing. The pain was unbearable, and Yuki moved away her hands from my neck, not worried about me at all. All she cared about was the palm in her hands. I thought she would be embracing me firmly, and exclaimed,
“What are you doing? Falling hurts.”
But Yuki didn’t care about what I said at all, her face beaming as she brought her palm to my face.
“Here, have a look.”
I didn’t know what she was saying. The important thing was that my back was hurting, and that my stomach was feeling Yuki’s ass. My reaction was a little strange, it seemed, as Yuki pouted, curling her lips.

“Can’t you be a little happier?”
“Eh. Erm, happy about what?”
“The time. Look, open your eyes wide”
I spent about 10 seconds or so to comprehend what she was saying. Another 5 seconds, and I accepted the reality before me. My start was gathered upon the time shown on the stopwatch in Yuki’s hand.
It was a new 100m record.
I beat Takeshita’s record.
“Why?”
Suddenly, I cried. Appearing deep within my eyes was Yuki’s smile. The stopwatch was within my eyes. Ah, I can’t see anymore.
“Well, Yoshi-kun, I think you’ve already long surpassed Takeshita-kun, but you admired him so much that you somehow ended up running in a manner to conserve your strength. When you reach the last 50m, you would always look down. That caused you to slow down a little. You could have just looked forward, but you didn’t. No, you couldn’t do that, right? The Takeshita-kun running before you all the time is no longer before you, and you’re scared. You really admired Takeshita-kun.”
I covered my eyes with my hands, gritting my teeth. If I didn’t, lots of things would flow out. More importantly, I didn’t want Yuki to see this expression of mine.
“He’s a really amazing guy. If that guy’s still running track, my speed’s nothing much compared to him. That was what I wanted to see. Ah, yeah. I wanted to see the Takeshita that’s faster that he was.”
But such a person didn’t exist.
I knew that. I knew how much I worked hard, prayed for it, and had Yuki help me reach that place, but there was nothing I had hoped for. Even so
——
Yuki moved my arm aside, and used her thin, long thumb to wipe away the tears in my eyes. Right, left. For every tear that was shed after, she wiped them for me.
My vision got clearly. I finally understood what was at the place I worked so hard to arrive at.
“Congratulations. You worked hard, Yoshi-kun.”
There was Yuki.
Her words.
I guess all my hard work had been repaid in full.
On our way back, we dropped by the convenience store again.
As thanks this time, I offered to treat her to ice cream, and she went for a 300 yen ice cream cup. No, well, it didn’t really matter. After some hesitation, I too chose the same brand of ice cream. Yuki chose strawberry flavour, while I chose rum and raisin. I guess it’s fine splurge a little, since we’re celebrating.
We sat alongside each other, at the same place, and found a cicada carcass there.

Summer was about to end.
Yuki stared at the husk without a soul, and muttered.
“Cicadas spent about 6 years waiting in the dirt.”
“The Aburazemi’s the same, it seems. I think I red somewhere that like the Aburazemi, there are cicadas that wait 17 years in the ground.”
“Yes. And within a week above ground, they’ll die. What’s the meaning of that?”
“…At least, there’s the mission of continuing to the next generation.”
“That might be the case for the females, but the males are different. A male cicada can mate with many, and so there are males unable to leave children behind. So, do you think that male has a purpose to live?”
Yuki’s words seemed poignant, so I had some thought into it, and answered,
“The meaning of life differs according to each individual, and I think this isn’t something I can agree or deny easily. But they definitely lived hard.”
“Even if they did, there’s no point to it at all.”
“I don’t think so. That’s what you taught me, Yuki. If I work hard and reach a certain destination, evenif there’s nothing I wanted, there’ll be other things to find. I found it. In fact, it seems like cicadas can survive for a month.”
“You’re lying.”
“I’m not. It’s hard to raise them, and that’s why they can’t last more than a week. That’s why many are mistaken. In fact, wild cicadas can live for about a month. That’s what the TV says, and that’s why they’ll definitely find something”
The last bit was just consolation.
It was a cheap lie I made just to get Yuki to smile.
To be honest, I really didn’t care about what happened to the cicada. Evne so, if Yuki wished for it, I would pray, hoping that its life would be meaningful.
Yuki finally picked up the spoon, and brought the somewhat melted ice cream into her mouth. “Nice, nice.” She said, and I kept watching her as I opened the lid.
“Hm? Speaking of which, you found something, Yoshi-kun?”
“It’s a secret.”
Under no circumstances should I say this. Thus, that was what I answered instead.
“But I feel this summer day is one I’ll definitely forget when I grow up.”
Even when today becomes the past, even when I grow older, even as time passes and fade.
I would never forget this summer heat,
The tears and sweat that were shed,
The sweetness of this ice cream,
The fragrance of the cherry blossoms.,
And the important thing I obtained.
Yuki stared at the plastic spoon, muttering.

It was dark, and I couldn’t see her expression.
All I heard was that she seemed to be pouting—
“—Liar.”

ハルの香り

Contact. 12

Chapter 3: Contact 12 – Haru’s Smell

“Can I trouble you for a moment?”
I was approached by a girl I never met.
It happened when I was at the bookstore before the station, looking for new works from my favorite author.
Her voice sounded a little sharp and forceful, probably because she was a little nervous.
“I want that book. Can you get it for me, please?”
Her slender fingertip was pointed at the tallest row on the bookshelf crammed with books. But there were covers of various colors arranged messily there. I couldn’t tell which book she was pointing to.
“Which one?”
“The one with the blue cover.”
“Ah.”
The moment I saw the book, I cried out.
It was the book I was looking for. As she had said, there was only one such book. It was placed on the bookshelf, and not the new publications corner.
“There’s a stool there.”
She didn’t notice my reaction at all as she pointed the same finger at the stool next to me. My eyes followed her finger from the rack to the stool.
And then, I looked towards the girl again.
She’s a cutie, her short hair just over her eye. She’s of similar height to me, maybe a little taller. She should be able to pick the book herself if she wanted to.
She wasn’t willing to pick it herself, because of her clothes.
She was wearing a miniskirt.
Since she’s dressed like this, there’ll be an upskirt if she stood up high. I see. Seems like girls have lots of things they have to take note of.
So I did what she told me to, moved the stool over, and reached my hand for the blue book. I wasn’t tall enough, so I tiptoed, and barely touched the shiny new cover of the book. It’s a new work from the author after a two year hiatus, and it’s in my hands. But…
Thought feeling a little conflicted, I handed the book obtained with much difficulty, to her.
“Thank you.”
She embraced the book dotingly in her clutches.
“Ah, it’s okay. You like this author’s works?”
“Yep.”
“I like them too.”
I was trying not to sound too downhearted, but it seemed the girl noticed some things in my tone, for she looked a little gloomy.

“Are you looking for this book too?”
“I never thought it would be at that place.”
“I couldn’t find it, so I went to ask the clerk. I was told “This should be the only one left”.”
“I see. So this is the only one left? Too bad. Guess I’ll go elsewhere to look.” I lied with a smile.
I searched through all the other stores before coming here.
Nada.
In the rural town I lived in, the store would not hold any books unless they were prized works, to be adapted into movies, or bestselling works in the thousands, even if they were new works. It’s my fault for being too naïve to think that I could get it on the release date, and too lazy to preorder.
Looks like I have to give up.
I dropped my shoulders dejectedly, and headed towards the exit.
“Wait!”
For some reason, she called out to me.
“Eh?”
“If you don’t mind, how about I lend you this book? Once I finish this book, that is.”
“Why lend me?”
“Because I like to read. I know the feeling of wanting to read a book as soon as possible.”
And while I was wondering how to answer her, she lowered her head awkwardly for some reason. “Erm, if I’m being too much of a busybody here, my apologies.” From that teeny-weeny voice of hers, I realized how much courage she needed to call out to me.
My chest suddenly became hot, and I naturally looked down.
“It’s alright. Thanks. I’m really grateful. My name’s Haruyoshi Segawa. Please take care of me.”
Upon hearing my words, she heaved a sigh of relief, and showed a bright smile.
“Yes. Nice to meet you, Segawa-kun. I’m Yuki Shiina.”
It happened in Spring, at the end of my second year in Middle School.
That was how I met Yuki Shiina.
Once we left the bookstore, we went to the café Shiina-san wanted to visit.
We cautiously opened the wooden door, and the bell inside chimed twice.
Flowing with an air of calmness in the shop was jazz music I never heard before, and the fragrance of coffee filled the corners of the shop.
It felt like a place for adults.
Time passed by slowly and gracefully here.
“Welcome. Oh my, what cute guests we have here.”
There’s one young, pretty big sister in the shop. We’re the only customers.
“Choose any seat you like.” The big sister beamed.
I was looking around in the shop, and without hesitation, Shiina-san sat at the seats with the brightest lighting. I hurried over, and sat opposite her.

The March sunlight shining from outside the window was really warm.
I had an urge to yawn, but I gritted my teeth, holding it in. Shiina-san saw this, and giggled. “You’re like a cat.”
“We should be ordering something. What do you want, Segawa-kun?”
I looked at the menu laid out on the table, and gulped in shock.
There wasn’t much on the menu, but each item’s shockingly pricey. A can of coke’s worth 450 yen, and black tea’s worth up to 1000. Who would order such stuff? Maybe some company boss. I don’t know.
Shiina-san seemed very familiar with this place as she ordered a cup of black coffee, so I ordered the same. I never once drank coffee.
“Here, for you. This is the book I just talked about.”
Once we placed our orders, Shiina-san took out two books from her bag. I received one of them.
It’s a book she had, not the one she just bought.
We talked about books while on our way from the bookstore to the café. During that time, Shiina-san recommended me a book.
She so happened to have the book with her, and lent it to me. While she’s reading the new work, I could spend the time reading this.
“I think you’ll like it.”
“Looking forward to it.”
Before I started reading, I flipped through a few pages. The coffee was served at this moment.
The unique, rich aroma drifted leisurely along with the steam.
“Please enjoy.”
The big sister bowed towards us, and returned to the counter. The long braids behind her head swayed sideways in a jovial manner.
I looked over at her, though not consciously. For some reason, Shiina-san pouted, as though reproaching me.
“Are you looking at that big sister?”
“Eh?”
“So she’s your type?”
“No. But, well, I find her pretty. Long hair’s nice, and she’s pretty feminine.”
“Hmm, so you like long hair.”
Shiina-san touched her hair, and sigh. In a familiar manner, she lifted the cup with her hands, and brought it to her lips. She added neither milk nor sugar, and looked really elegant. Even the way she drank coffee was out of a painting, it felt like.
But I had to add something here. Till this point, she’s as pretty as a painting.
Shiina-san slowly brought the coffee to her lips, and the moment she gulped it down, she groaned. What’s with her?
“It’s bitter. What is this? It’s so bitter.”
“Eh? You don’t normally drink this?”
“It’s the first time I’m drinking this, actually.”

“Your first challenge is black coffee, huh?”
“But it seems like all women reading here at the café drink black coffee.”
Shiina-san groaned, looking as though she was poisoned, and reached out to the little bottle at the edge of the time. She took out two cubes of sugar into the black liquid, stirred it with a spoon, and took a sip. Again she winced, and added another sugar cube.
After that, she cautiously took another sip, “Yep.” And nodded happily.
“Now it’s drinkable.”
To be honest, I was a little nervous to be facing an adult-like Shiina-san, but after seeing this, I heaved a sigh of relief. “It’s really bitter.” So Shiina-san said as she kept adding sugar into the coffee, and clearly she was a girl of my age. There was no reason for me to feel nervous.
“What about you, Segawa-kun? Do you often drink coffee?”
“It’s my first time drinking this too, actually.”
I told the truth. “Ahahaha.” Shiina-san“ laughed.
“Then you’re like me. Do you want sugar? Or are you going to challenge this black coffee?”
“Well, it’s a rare chance, so I’ll challenge.”
Like Shiina-san from before, I brought the coffee to my mouth without adding anything. At that moment, the scalding feeling and bitterness stung my tongue. I couldn’t help but frown. My tongue was aching. I scalded myself, it seemed. I hurriedly took a gulp of water, and put ice on the tip of my tongue.
“How is it? Very bitter?”
“I burned, my tongue.”
“You’re unexpectedly careless, Segawa-kun.”
Shiina-san said as she sipped at the coffee, only for her to frown again. After some hesitation, she too cooled her tongue. I knew what happened to her. Surely her tongue’s feeling the same as me this time.
“You’re careless.”
I commented gleefully. Shiina-san looked a little awkward as she fumbled with the ice in her mouth.
Only the sound of flipping pages echoed in the shop. Once we began reading, the big sister switched off the music, and drifted off to dreamland. She looked pretty comfortable. Probably had a nice dream too, since she was smiling.
“Hey,”
I was called, and lifted my head. I saw Shiina-san close the book and look towards me. I tucked the bookmark in the book, and closed it as she did. The coffee cups on the table were empty, and the glasses of water next to us were half empty.
“What is it?”
“How do you write the kanji ‘Haru Yoshi’?”
“Why ask this out of a sudden?”
“No, I’m just a little curious. It’s a rare name after all.”

“Is this about some novel? A trick question related to the name, or something like that?”
Shiina-san’s body shook. “I-it’s nothing like that at all.” She flatly denied. It’s really a terrible lie, so much so that she raised her voice at the very end.
After thinking about it, I pointed my finger on the droplets on the glass, and used the droplets to write on the table. The droplets formed lines on the surface, lines that came together to form words. Soon after, the crooked words ‘Haruyoshi, □□’ were formed.
“This is the kanji.”
“Ehh. Ah, what a coincidence.”
Shiina-san drew a word ‘ki, □’ behind the ‘Yoshi, □’. ‘Yuki □□‘, so I muttered.
“We share a word.
“How nice.” So Shiina-san said.
We kept reading, chatted from time to time, and ordered cake. Before we knew it, almost five hours passed. No other customers visited this shop.
The night temperature dropped drastically, and the colourful lights formed a blurry glow in the town.
I could see stars in the sky.
Shiina-san told me the names of a few stars, so I asked her which of them were the ones she mentioned, but it seemed she only knew of their names.
While I sent Shiina-san back to the station, she gave me the blue book, as promised. “Thanks.” I bowed gratefully. The heaviness of the hard cover left me elated.
“Anyway, are you busy tomorrow, Segawa-kun? It’s Spring break now, isn’t it?
“I got track practice in the morning, but nothing else in the afternoon.”
If there’s anything to do, I guess I just wanted to spend the afternoon reading this book.
“Then can we meet in the afternoon? I want to talk about this book, and what you think?”
I recalled that while we spent the entire day just reading and chatting, we’re happy. Shiina-san panicked, probably because she saw that I was being silent,
“Ah, but I don’t need you to finish it by tomorrow, Segawa-kun. You can talk about the book you read too. Well, I really enjoyed myself today.”
Ah. Why’s that? Seeing how Shiina-san had the same feelings as I, I was really happy.
“Alright. See you tomorrow.”
“Yes.”
The moment we bade farewell, “Ah.” Shiina-san exclaimed as she pointed to the sky. The white mist that occurred when we talked was no longer present. Spring had arrived, the season of all beginnings. Right now, Winter’s the furthest back.
“I know that star though.”
She told me the name of that bright, orange star.

“Arcturus. The Hawaiians call it Hōkūleʻa, the star of Gladness.”
Once club activities ended, I walked down the corridor. At this moment, a round white object scampered by me. Time passed slowly during Spring vacation, especially in the side block with clubrooms. Thus, that fast speed really caught my attention. So, what was that?
I walked as I thought about the real identity of the object that caught my attention, only to be smacked in the back of the head.
“Ow. Who are you?”
“Hey, Haru.”
My name was then called out. It’s a familiar voice.
“Akane, can you stop smacking people out of a sudden?”
I called out the culprit’s name as I turned around, and saw my peer Akane Rindou puffing her cheeks angrily, standing almightily. She was holding a white shopping bag in her right hand. So that was the white thing. Seemed like there’s lots of juice inside it.
Probably some reward for her juniors.
Since last summer, she was made captain of the swimming team.
“No, it’s your fault, Haru.”
“So tell me what I just did?”
“It’s your fault for doing nothing. You should at least greet a classmate who passed by. Seriously, you’re always like this, Haru, acting like nothing happened. This isn’t good.”
It’s unreasonable, but since Akane said so, this passive me chose to lower my head in apology. Well, let’s just get this done and over with.
“My bad. Didn’t notice you there, Akane. I was spacing out.”
“So you’re saying that I’ve no presence? Return my maiden heart for hoping even a little that you’ll talk to me.”
“I’m shocked.”
“Shocked about what?”
“Shocked that you have such a thing, Akane.”
Smack.
Ah, for some reason, I heared a sound I should not be hearing.
“What do you think I am?”
Akane’s tsurime eyes were completely raised. She raised the blunt weapons in her two hands. Akane’s pretty thin, but due to her swimming training, she’s full of muscles. Yeah. I knew that arm strength-wise, she’s stronger than me. At this point, it’s very dangerous. I continued to dodge her repeatedly, for dear life.
“Wai, it’s dangerous. Stop.”
“Shut up!”
“I get it. My bad.”
“Then what do you understand?”
“Eh, well.”
“So you don’t understand anything!”
“No, erm. Yeah. I get that you’re a really charming girl.”

The moment I shouted that, the blunt weapon grazed my nose. My heart was pounding wildly, and it sounded really loud. My body was shaking all over. For a moment, my body was shivering, and cold sweat broke out.
I didn't know if my desperation reached her, but Akane finally stopped her attacks.
"For some reason, it feels like you just said that without putting your heart into it. It's annoying."
"Then what am I supposed to say?"
"What—ever. I'm at fault too for having hopes on you, Haru. Both sides lost out here."
No, I'm the only one who suffered. This time, I barely managed to swallow these words reaching my mouth. Clearly I would have added oil to the fire otherwise. I won't make the same mistake again.
"So, what are you doing?"
"What? Practice's over, so I'm returning to the clubroom. What about you?"
"Well, I'm cleaning the clubroom with everyone else. Want to do that before the new members come in. You can help out if you want. I'll reward you with juice."
"Sorry. Got an appointment here."
Upon hearing that, Akane's nicely shaped eyebrows frowned.
"Again? Feels like you're being antisocial recently. Is it like the last time when you said that you got something on, and went off alone?"
"No no no. I really have an appointment with someone today."
"Hmm. Guess there's no helping it. It's a pity. But well, spend some time with me."
"I said I got something on."
"I'm not asking you to clean the clubroom with me. I'm taking a break. I won't take up that much of your time. I'll have to deliver juice over anyway. Since you're spacing out and walking, that means you have lots of time, right?"
Akane's right. There's still 40 minutes until the appointment.
"Well, that, I don't mind."
"It's decided then.."
Akane snapped her fingers, and put the pile of juice by the pillar. She then started to open the corridor windows one by one.
Whenever she opened the transparent glass windows, Akane's short hair would flutter with the wind. Her face was steaming with hot air, probably due to work. Her face was dyed pink.
"Ahh—the wind really feels good."
"Yeah."
I poked my head from the same window as hers, and for some reason, she showed a weird face. "Hiee" she shrieked, "How rude." She pulled some distance from me, and I really felt emotionally hurt.

To heal my broken heart as much as possible, I looked towards the hills. The weather's fine, and the distant places are all clear and visible. The lingering pink might be cherry blossoms, or maybe plum flowers.
"The club seniors have all graduated, haven't they?"
Akane pointed her finger at a window nearby, saying that.
Her voice lacked the vigor she had before.
"Yeah."
"Don't you think it's scary when so many things happen out of a sudden? Like, next year, and the stuff after all. Can I really handle them all?"
Ah, so this is why Akane called me over.
But unfortunately, Akane called for the wrong person.
It's true that Akane and I will be the seniors, and we'll be club presidents. But Akane also had to handle the expectations of the entire school. Just the previous year, she barely missed out on the Nationals. The pressure she bore was something I couldn't match.
I turned around, and leaned my body on the railing. I then pulled myself back, looking up, and saw the sun half-hidden behind the roof. That caused me to narrow my eyes.
It's so bright. So I thought.
It wasn't the sun that was too bright for me, but Akane.
For me, the natural reaction after defeat was regret.
Those that had no such thoughts would never make it as a competitor.
Akane was terrified of that because there was something of equilibrium to the utmost effort she put in.
And I had none of that.
My mind was just filled with the cliché, passive mindset of 'it's fine', 'you can do it'. For her, these useless words of mine probably would seem so empty to her.
Even if I did try to think hard about it—
Ah, it's useless after all.
The half-hidden sun was burning my skin. "Ahh." I opened my mouth, and for some reason, I felt parched, probably because the rotten words reaching behind my teeth had vaporized.
I had nothing else to say.
"Anyway, do you know? The maths teacher Matsue-chan's getting married soon."
In the end, I chose to escape by changing the topic.
Akane didn't say anything, and forgave this dishonesty that was so typical of me.
"That's a lie. Who is it? The PE teacher Jimi-sensei? The language teacher Yone-sensei? There's lots of rumors about her. So she finally decided on one?"
"Eh, Matsue-chan has that many rumors?"
I was a little shocked. I always thought she was the pure, pretty teacher.

“You’re too naïve, Haru. If you’re not careful, you’ll be led astray by a bad girl, you know?”
Akane laughed.
I too laughed.
Just the pointless time trickled by quietly.
One day,
Will I too be able to find something I will give my utmost for?
So I thought blankly in a corner of my mind.
I bade farewell to Akane, and met up with Shiina-san as promised. She came to a place near school to pick me up. When I noticed her leaning on the telephone phone, “Good afternoon.” She greeted me.
“Since you’re here, how about you observe my club activities?”
“I really want to, but you aren’t running by yourself, are you, Segawa-kun?”
“Of course. It’s a club activity after all. I was running with the others.”
“Hm, in that case, I guess not. That’s not a place I can enter.”
“I don’t think you’ll be found out.”
“That’s not the problem. It’s just a rule I set for myself.”
We chit-chatted, and went to the beach area near the school, as Shiina-san suggested. The butterflies with pure white wings fluttered around the golden Nanohanas, as though dancing around.
Shiina-san happily reached out for one the butterflies had not stopped on, and her fingertip touched one of them.
Without looking at me, she asked,
“Hey, Segawa-kun, why did you help me pick that book at the bookstore?”
She pulled back her finger, and the petal shook. The tremor reached the other petals, and the butterflies reacted as they flew towards the sky. Till the very end, Shiina-san watched the butterflies rise with the wind, fluttering gracefully.
“You asked me to pick it for you, right?”
“Yep. But you’re looking for that book too, Segawa-kun. You wanted it too, so why did you give me the book?”
“Well, you’re the one who found it first, Shiina-san. That’s why you have the right to buy it.”
“You don’t feel reluctant about it?”
I guess I probably didn’t feel reluctant about it at all, just some regret.
I didn’t know if Shiina-san had taken my answer for a yes, “I say.” As she was of similar height to me, her eyes were about the same level.
“Things you really want can’t be obtained if you don’t reach out for yourself.”
“What’s that? Who came up with that saying?”
“Nope. It’s a sage’s (my) teaching.”
Saying that, Shiina-san reached her hand out towards me. Her clenched fist opened up like a flower.
“Can you hold my hand?”
“Eh?”

“Please?.”
“…Well, I can.”
Just as she touched the Nanohana, I gently touched her fingertips, and my fingers reached hers. Finally, our palms matched.
At that moment, we exerted strength, and our hands were finally held together.
“Yep. This is what I’m talking about. Do you understand?”
I could only shake my head.
I understood nothing.
“If only you’ll understand this one day, Segawa-kun.”
I didn’t manage to hear what she was muttering about, and when I asked, Shiina-san laughed it off.
“Nothing at all. More importantly, where are we going today?”
After that, we went to various places.
We went to the game center, the bowling alley, and watched a movie. The hour hand passed six, and while sending Shiina-san to the train station, I met a familiar face.
It’s my classmate, Takuma Midou.
Seemed like he was hanging out with his buddies from the basketball team.
“Yo, ain’t it Haru? Whatcha doing here?”
Takuma gestured for the others to head off first.
“Nothing much, well, just hanging out. Just ended club activities, Takuma?”
“Sorta. We’re going for karaoke later. You coming along?”
“I’m not going. I’m not too familiar with the guys on the basketball team, and I’m not alone.”
“You’re together with your club guys?”
“No, not them.”
Once I was asked this question, I suddenly thought of something.
What’s my relationship with Shiina-san? Acquiantances? Friends? While I fumbled about, she poked her head out over my shoulder.
“Good evening. Are you Segawa-kun’s friend?”
“Eh?”
Upon seeing Shiina-san, time stood still for Takuma, and only restarted five seconds later. Well, I can’t say that I don’t understand. If it were me, I would have showed the exact same reaction.
“Hah? Ehhhhhh, wait wait wait. Who’s this pretty girl? She’s not from our school, right? Anyway, eh, eh, you, have you…”
It’s a rare sight.
Takuma’s smart and athletic, and he’s normally a lot more matured than those in our school year. He’s always able to deal with each problem calmly.
And that Takuma’s mouth was wide upon, looking back and forth between Shiina-san and me.
“Wait, Takuma. You’re mistaken.”
“What am I mistaken about, you traitor.”
“No, I’m telling you to hold up. I didn’t betray you or anything.”

I was trying to coax Takuma, but Shiina-san tugged at the hem of my shirt.
“What now?” so I thought, and at that moment, she put her hand at my ear, blowing into it. It was a nerve wrecking feeling, and I covered my ear with my hand, exclaiming wildly. I felt a chill down my spine, and my cheek was heating up. What’s she playing at?
Takuma glared at me as though I was the enemy who killed his relatives.
“Hey, whatcha mean you’re not betraying me? What did she just whisper to you? That she likes you? Aren’t you just flirting!?”
“No, it’s not what you say, you know. Shiina-san, speak up for me.”
“Ehh, have my feelings not reached you, Segawa-kun?”
Shiina-san deliberately turned her body around, delivering the haymaker. The perfectly fatal hit left me completely speechless.
“Damnit!!!” Takuma yelled.
Then, he gently tapped my head, before running off into the night streets.
“Haru, you traitor!!! Explode already!!” That booming voice of his echoed.
Once he vanished from my sights, I asked Shiina-san, who had been laughing the entire time.
“That was on purpose, right?”
“What are you saying?”
She put her hand under her chin, playing the fool.
“You’re really a criminal who believes she’s right.”
“Fine, fine. You don’t like that, Segawa-kun?”
“Eh?”
“You hate that people may think you’re in that kind of relationship with me?”
“…Not really.”
“I see. Then it’s alright, no? More importantly, I’m a little shocked that you’ll address a classmate by name directly, Segawa-kun. You don’t seem to give that sort of impression..”
“I call those I’m on good term with by name.”
“I see. So call me ‘Yuki’, Segawa-kun. I’ll start calling you ’Yoshi-kun’.”
“You’re not calling me Haru?”
“Well, I hate the Spring for ‘Haru’, but I like the ‘Yoshi’. We both have the same kanji, so I’ll call you Yoshi-kun.”
“You hate spring? Why?”
“…When Spring comes, the air warms, and the snow melts away, disappearing. Everyone will forget the snow (Yuki), right? The snow’s there, but it gets forgotten. I just don’t really like it.”
Though the kanji’s different, her name sounds like ‘Snow’ in Japanese. Shiina-san probably experienced the feeling of being forgotten.
It wasn’t something I could easily deny or affirm, since I knew nothing about her.
All I knew was that when I heard ‘I hate the Spring (Haru), my heart ached. For I got the feeling she was saying that the snow and the spring could never be together.

“Hey, Yoshi-kun. Call me Yuki.”
But even so, if she hoped for it, I’ll call her Yuki.
“Got it, Yuki.”
At that moment, Yuki’s face reddened.
“Woah, being called by name’s a lot more amazing than I thought. This might be the first time a guy other than my dad called me that.”
I watched Yuki point her face with her finger, and found it a little funny. However, her words repeated themselves countless times in a corner of my mind, deep within my heart.
——I hate the spring.
On the only rest day in spring vacation for club activities, I went to Yairo Park with Yuki.
The park built around the lake was 5km in perimeter, and it was said that different scenes could be seen from eight different points, thus the name Yairo Park.
It’s a working day, and the park’s a lot quieter than usual. At night, it would be bustling full of adults wanting to view flowers, but not so in the daytime. But Yuki’s a lot happier than I thought.
“Wow, there’s such a place too.”
My hands were in my coat pockets as I followed Yuki, who was watching with much curiosity. I fumbled for the shape of the little item in my pocket, checking if it was there. It was something I could easily put in my palm, but I just felt that it was really heavy, not physically heavy though. I had an additional emotional weight to this certain item.
The reason why I brought Yuki here was because I wanted a place nobody would disturb us, and gift her something I bought yesterday.
The other conditions were fulfilled.
All I need was the mood and timing, but it’s difficult to get them to align.
We went halfway around the park, and the gift was still bouncing in my pocket.
Ever since I met Yuki, I found myself to be interesting uselessly. I thought I could handle a lot more things perfectly, but I ended up fumbling before Yuki. Why’s that?
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The light shone towards the leaves, and through them. Shadows were formed, forming stark contrasts of black and white on my face.
Under the gentle sunlight, I aimed for a moment to talk. Instead, I was approached by someone instead.
It’s a deeper voice, different from Yuki.
“Ah, the two of you there. Hold on a moment.”
“Eh?”
We turned around to the voice calling for us, and found a large bear-like uncle sprinting towards us. I could hear a rumbling sound effect. He looked so panicky, so we just stopped in our tracks——that was a wrong choice. That man was huffing so hard, he was almost dying. He went behind me, and suddenly grabbed me by the elbow.
“Ahh——I’m saved. Please come along with us.”
“Wh-what’s going on?
“We’re filming a movie, but we don’t have enough actors at the last moment. It’s causing us lots of trouble.”
“No no no, hold on. I don’t get what you mean.”
“Don’t get, what I mean?”
The uncle turned towards me with bewilderment. I had a closeup look of his face, and found him to be still somewhat young. He’s probably in his twenties, at the phase when I’m still somewhat able to call him a big brother.
That man’s eyes were fixed upon Yuki, who’s behind me, and the round eyes hidden behind the hair were dazzling.
It was obvious what he was thinking. I wanted to run immediately, but my arm got grabbed, and I couldn’t break free. He spaced out for about three seconds or so, and called me again.
“Boy.”
“Don’t wanna.”

If I had been alone, I might have been overwhelmed by this guy and thrown in the white towel. However, I'm different, since Yuki's behind me.
"But I haven't said anything?"
"I know what you want to say. You want Yuki to appear in the movie."
"Please consider."
"That's impossible."
And at this point, Yuki, who had been watching the entire development, raised her hand,
"Why is it that you're deciding about me, Yoshi-kun?"
Both of us looked towards Yuki.
"…You want to act?"
"It sounds fun. It's a great way to commemorate today too."
The man didn't let the words slip him by, and immediately chimed in loudly.
"Yes yes. Don't decide on what the girl wants, boy."
Then you should have asked Yuki instead of me, right? Speaking of which, it seemed like this guy never intended to negotiate with Yuki to begin with.
What's going on
"Hey, let's go, Yoshi-kun."
The whole process was a little unpleasant, but I was forced to got it.
Understood, that was all I could say.
"Really? Then it's decided. Both of you shall perform then. Yosh, thank goodness."
The guy forced the conclusion, probably to stop us from changing our minds.
I lost.
But since I don't like it, just let me continue to struggle a little.
"Mind letting go for my arm now?"
The filming scene was at the bench in the park.
I wasn't very sure of the scenes before and after, but it seemed we're going to film a scene of a quarreling couple making amends.
The guy who called us over was apparently the director of this movie. "Yo director." someone called for him, and he responded, giving a completely different look from what we just saw. The aura around him changed immediately.
Calling for him was a slightly plump big sister. She approached us, looked back and forth between Yuki and me, and finally fixed her eyes on Yuki.
"What's with this girl? Isn't she a real cutie?"
"Yeah. I want to get her to act in our movie."
"Nice, nice. For the next movie?"
"Nope, this movie."
"Heh?"
Suddenly, the atmosphere froze over. "No no no no no no no no", the big sister kept repeating those words. "No no no no no no no."
"What are you thinking? This won't work"
"Really? I want to see how she performs."

“Look, I get how you feel. I too want her to act. But what about this movie? I don’t know what role you want her to appear as, but if she’s acting too, the whole movie might get scrapped.”
“Don’t worry. I’ll get this film done properly. But well, I might have to cause you guys some trouble…your efforts won’t be wasted. Trust me.”
The director smacked his chest without hesitation.
“…Is that so?”
“Yeah. That’s right.”
The big sister gave up and sighed, probably because this little conversation allowed for them to communicate a few things.
“Haa. I got it. It’s pointless for me to say anything for. Anyway, I’ll leave you to do the follow shot Kazuha-chan. She’s a sharp one, and she’ll know when we aren’t taking this seriously enough. If that happens, she’ll kick up a fuss, and there won’t be any other scenes to film.We can’t allow this to happen.”
“Got it. I’ll do that. Sorry, but I’ll leave you to guide these two.”
After saying that, the director hurried off.
We watched that back, along with the big sister whose name we knew not of.
The tense atmosphere vanished in an instant. There’s just the big sister smiling as happily as the director did, and us two, who didn’t know the meaning of that conversation.
“Erm, just now, what you two just talked about,”
“Ahh, don’t worry about it. You’ll understand. But well, I’ll say this first. That guy’s really selfish and stubborn, so just say what you want to him.”
Yuki and I exchanged looks, tilting our heads.
In the end, we were imprisoned for almost four hours.
It was just a single scene, but there were multiple retakes.
It seemed these would be edited into a scene later on.
The roles we were assigned were passers-by A and B. If Yuki walked in front, she would attract too much attention, so the director instructed that I be a shield to block her.
But even so, the director saw the short that was just completed, “Hmm.”
“I guess she attracts too much attention. My eyes just end up looking towards her.”
He muttered, making sure the actors didn’t hear him, but as Yuki and I were nearby, we heard him clearly. After that, we realized the director just wanted us to hear that, and that was why he kept his voice down.
“Wanna look?”
He waved us over, and we did as he said, looking at the laptop screen. It showed 10 minutes of footage.
In the center of the footage was a college couple.
And behind them were two passers-by.
These two passers-by had no lines, no description, and they were just talking. Before we knew it, we found that the scene had changed. Eh, what’s going on? I couldn’t remember what the protagonists were talking

about. Yuki's face was the only thing left in my memory. In that memory, Yuki and I were smiling, chatting. This little thing alone was like a miracle. If it were a complete movie, surely I would not want to spend this time watching any other scenes. Even if I did see the entire movie, in the end, what remained in my mind might only be Yuki's smile.
As the big sister had said, the story was all wasted.
"Hey boy. Don't you find it a pity? It's rare to see such a pretty human around. You want to see more stories involving the girl, right?"
I finally understood the meaning of the conversation between the director and the big sister.
The director knew this movie would be scrapped, but he spent the time and effort just to get the actress Yuki.
But Yuki shook her head.
"Erm, it's fine. Don't worry, it's usable."
"No no no, girl, you don't understand. We can't use this movie. Everyone watching will just look towards you."
The director seemed taken aback by Yuki's response, and he panicked. Before I knew it, he was already talking to Yuki directly. He might be feeling really anxious, or maybe it's his nature as a director.
"Shall we have a bet then?"
Yuki proposed, her face showing some intent.
"If this scene causes the movie to be scrapped, I'll listen to anything you'll say, director."
"So that means you'll agree if I say that I want you to appear in the movie?"
"Right. But it's impossible if a miracle doesn't happen. A miracle doesn't happen many times."
"What do you mean?"
"…In other words, if a miracle occurs once, that's luck, and there won't be a second time. No, for every miracle, an equivalent price has to be paid, so it's not all down to luck."
I couldn't get what Yuki was saying.
The director too probably felt the same. After some thinking, "I see." he summized. He's probably content just to have Yuki appear in the movie.
Before we knew it, the day was darkening, and the night grew.
The director and the others hastily began to pack up.
I stared blankly at them; the director noticed me, and approached me.
"Good work there."
"It's been a long day."
"You really helped me out. Well, you only appeared for like 10 seconds or so though. Acting's fun, right?"
"Guess not. I had enough of it. I'm not too suited to standing out."
We talked at a place a little far away, looking at Yuki.
The common saying goes that three women make a market, so if there's five, there's no end. Heredictally, girls are creatures who like to chat. I

grew up listening to my mother and little sister insist their way out, so I had no choice but to wait for their conversation to end.
“Well, to be honest, can the scene today be used?”
“Well, to be honest, it’s impossible to use it by itself. Since I had a bet with the girl, I’ll try to edit it. If our internal critical review is bad, we’ll just have to scrap it. Then I’ll have to bow down to those guys and get them to replay it.”
“I see.”
That’s all I could say. Everything left was up to the director to decide, since it’s a bet between him and Yuki.
“Oh yeah, these tickets are for you. There’ll be a public screening during the culture festival next Autumn, so do come by to watch. I’ll deliver the best movie for everyone”
“Next year? Not this year?”
“The production’s probably won’t be finished this year. Once this is done next year, I’ll be graduating.”
I received the tickets from the director’s hands.
The tickets were crumpled, probably because he just shoved it into my pocket. I tried to flatten them in my hands, but I couldn’t even it up. The red words ‘Yasaka University’ were a little worn out.
“Eh? Why two?”
“Invite the girl alone. I’m dumb at such things, but I can understand a little through the camera. Do your best. Normally, it’s the guy who asks the girl out to watch.”
The director said some vague thing, and patted my back hard with a smile. My organs were hurting.
We bade farewell to the director and the others, and arrived at a large cherry blossom tree.
Unfortunately, the sakuras had bloomed a long time ago, and the tree looked a little forlorn. The white flowers had scattered, and the trees on the branches were lush. The next season was coming.
“What did you talk about with the director?”
“Just a few words. What about you, Yuki? What did you say to the big sisters?”
“Secrets.”
“Secrets, huh?”
“Secrets are absolutely important to a girl, you know?”
She said demurely, and ran towards the sakura trees. The breeze rustled, and the petals danced. The skirt fluttered. Her fluffy hair shook.
Suddenly, I felt an aching heat on my beat. The director’s large hand shoved me on the back.
I made up my mind.
“Yuki!”
I shouted out to her, from a not-so-far distance.
“What–is–it?”

“I got something for you.”
I pulled out the thing that was inside my pocket the entire time. There was no turning back. I approached Yuki. It was a few meters, but I was gasping for breathing. My heart was breathing faster than a 100m sprint.
“If you don’t mind, will you accept this?”
I handed over the finely wrapped box to her. My pocket was finally a little lighter. It was the first time I gave a gift to a girl other than my family, and I was really nervous.
I gulped hard, and said,
“Open it.”
Hearing that, Yuki opened the box, and retrieved a little pink bottle from it.
“A sakura perfume?”
“Yep. You said that you hate the spring because everyone forgets the snow. If there’s the smell of sakura all the time, maybe you might think of snow as well.”
Yuki said that she hated the Spring.
So I’ve been thinking.
I was thinking how to get her to remember the snow even after it melted, when winter ends and spring comes. This was the answer I got after much thinking.
“I see. So this is the smell of spring.”
“Yes, that’s why.”
I hope that you won’t say that you hate the spring.
I swallowed down the last bit of words. Even if I didn’t say anything, my thoughts probably reached her.
After some consideration, Yuki knew that I wouldn’t continue to talk, and she said,
“But will it be as you say?”
“I guess.”
“Ah–you aren’t confident about it.”
“Of course, I will remember. Or rather, I definitely won’t forget. I can’t say the same for others though.”
“Then it’s enough.”
Yuki said. “If you can remember, then it’s good enough, Yoshi-kun.”
We looked up at the rows of sakura trees. We scented upon the sweet smell. Whenever I smell it, I’ll remember about Yuki, I guess. Ah, how can I forget then?
“And then, there’s something you want to give me too, right?”
Eh? There’s something else?
I tried to recalled, “Haa.” and Yuki gave a deliberately long sigh, telling me the answer impatiently,
“You’re not giving me what the director gave you?”
“So you know?”

I reached my hand into my other pocket, and took out the two color raffles. I wanted to invite her out another day, but well, so be it. I handed a pretty crumpled movie ticket to Yuki.
“It’s a movie ticket. If you can, you mind watching it with me?”
“Yep.”
Yuki nodded. “But.” she added.
“I want you to invite me again.”
“What?”
“I’m trying to see if you can remember me. Next year, I’ll come by with this sakura perfume smell, so invite me to the movie again. You should hold these two tickets for now.”
“Understood.”
“Make sure you do it.”
“Yeah, it’s a promise.”
Hearing my words, Yuki looked really elated, but at the same time, she muttered something. It’s an icy cold voice completely unrelated to the expression she showed–
“—Liar.”

Contact.0
蒼い瞳の白い猫

Chapter 4: Contact.0 – Blue Eyes White Cat

“I think you should stop.”
I was called out by an unfamiliar voice.
That happened when I was trying to discreetly slip a common chocolate pack into my pocket at the convenience store.
It was the voice of someone who firmly believed he’s doing the right thing.
“Let go.”
I wanted to shake off the hand grabbing mine, but I couldn’t.
He had a thin girl-like face.
He’s also a little shorter than me, but he’s still a guy.
He’s stronger than me.
And his voice’s deeper than mine.
“I’ll let go if you stop.”
“This has nothing to do with you, right?”
“But it’s still a crime.”
Even so, I wanted to retort something. It’s still my fault though.
The words in my throat became a sigh, and I glared towards the clock on the wall. The minute and hour hand were in opposite directions, dividing the clock into half. In other words, it’s 6pm.
In another 5 hours, the world will be rewritten again.
Everything I did, and all traces of my existence will vanish. Whether I do succeed at stealing, it doesn’t matter. It’s all just for killing time, not about doing it until I get caught.
“Got it.”
I put the chocolate back onto the shelf, and as he promised, he let go of my hand. Maybe it’s because he grabbed me firmly, for my arm’s still aching even after he let me go. I put my other hand on the hot, painful place, and head out towards the the entrance without looking at the boy.
Once I left, the howling winds cut at my bare face like sharp blades.
More than the cold, I felt pain.
Ow, ow, so I muttered.
But nobody stopped for a moment.
Everyone just kept on smiling, with some sort of a legal duty to keep living on happily, and never noticed someone like me. Everyone’s just indulging the vibrant lights and colors of the streets.
I deliberately shied away from the various sounds of the world, just listening to my own breathing and footsteps. I have feet. I’m moving forward. I’m breathing. My heart’s beating.
I was in such a place.
Still alive.
It should be all that I yearned, things I so desperately reached out for.
But even so, why do I feel such pain?

It’s not a tremendous pain, nor was it an intense fear, but in another sense, living on this world is the same as living on Hell. The loneliness and forlorn feeling accumulating every day was killing my heart slowly.
“Wait.”
Suddenly, I unexpectedly heard someone calling out for me.
For me, who’s envious about such little things, I might have been tired of the concept of living.”
“Wait.”
And I heard the voice.
The voice’s closer than before, loudly. At the same time, I felt that I heard this voice before.
“So I say,”
I kept walking to escape from the streets filled with happiness.
For me, happy music, the smiling faces of others, or even the call for others were akin to poison for me.
“Wait for me. I’m calling for you, so will you just stop for a moment?”
I was grabbed by the shoulder, and taken aback. I thought my heart was about to pop out. How many years had it been since I heard my shocked voice?
I turned back, and found the boy from before panting, standing behind me.
Feeling a little awkward, I pulled my distance, and glared at him.
“Wh-what? Got something you want?”
“Well, not really. If you don’t mind, this one’s for you.”
From the convenience store bag he was holding, the boy handed over the chocolate I tried to steal.
Once I realized what he was trying to do, I was enraged.
“I don’t need it.”
“Why? Didn’t you want to eat this?”
I didn’t really want the chocolate. I wanted something completely different.
But I couldn’t express myself clearly.
Because I didn’t know what the thing I wanted was.
“You don’t understand me at all, so why do this? Seriously, I really hate busybodies like you. I really, really hate you!!”
I yelled like a kid, my breathing erratic. I gasped, and the cold air entered my body, causing me much pain.
But I wouldn’t say that I was hurting again.
Because I didn’t want to be sympathized by the boy before me.
Hearing that, the boy looked down.
After a moment, he grabbed the bag in his hand firmly as he lifted his head.
He looked towards me. The center of his eyes were glittering with light.
“But well, if you don’t hate sweets, can’t you accept these?”
“Why?”
“Look, I know I’m doing something very unlike me, but I guess I can give a gift to someone I don’t know just because I feel like it. Besides,”
The boy looked a little sad, and smiled with some hesitation.

“It’s Christmas Eve after all.”
“You’re a weirdo.”
The boy didn’t argue back; he shoved the bag to me, and ran off. Soon after, he disappeared into the darkness of the night city. The departing footsteps continued to echo in my chest.
—Weirdo.
Once again, I muttered.
It was a winter day, soon after I was 15.
That was how I encountered the boy whose name I knew not of.
❀
Every Tuesday, starting from 10.54pm.
It might look like some late night commercial, but nobody other than me knows that the world changes at this time.
A new world will be born after all records of a certain girl are erased.
Due to a traffic accident eight years ago, there was a slight change to how the world should be.
A traffic accident’s not uncommon.
Many such news can be seen weekly.
In the country I live in, including all the minor incidents, it seemed there’s almost 500,000 traffic accidents. Amongst them, about 4,000 of them involve deaths, and the number of the deaths are about as many. In other words, each day, 11 people die, and for every two hours or so, someone dies due to a traffic accident.
Ah, yes.
Looking at it this way, it’s really not a rare thing.
But when the 500,000 or even the 4,000 aren’t just ordinary data, but names related to those near them, how much pain and gloom it causes? I personally experienced it.
Let’s talk about the past.
It’s the story of a family, that became part of the 500,000, 3 of the 4,000.
No, maybe it’s a little different.
After that, I’ll talk about the story of a certain girl who escaped from being one of the 4,000.
On her 7th birthday, the girl lost everything.
That day was supposed to be a special day for her. They were going to the theme park she really liked, together with her beloved family. There was no reason for her not to be happy.
“Wakey wakey, we’re here.”
The girl who fell asleep in the car was woken by her mother. She opened her eyes, and found a blurry figure. The figure that’s a little smaller was her little sister Umi. “Onee-tan, we’re here.” She mimicked her mother, shaking the girl’s body.
“Nnn. Morning Umi.”
“Ai. Morning onee-tan.”
Seeing this, both the father and the mother smiled.

Perhaps it was a form a undiluted happiness scattered everywhere in this world.
“Come on, let’s go. We’re going to enjoy ourselves all day. Let’s get ready!”
And with the enthusiastic father prompting, the girl got off the car, and found the castle she saw on TV before her eyes.
Wahh, the girl just cried out. Her consciousness was focused on the theme park before her. For her, the scenery could only be described as magical. Lights were shining everywhere, and even the voices seemed like they were full of color.
Just as her father had said, everyone was enjoying themselves fully—
They played at a few facilities, enjoyed delicious food, and toured a few attractions.
They really enjoyed themselves.
It was the best birthday ever.
Her father, holding lots of gifts in both hands, put the sleeping Umi back onto the car, and it was 9pm by the time they made their way back.
Normally, at this time, the family would be done showering, in their pajamas, but they were not sleepy at all. There was still some magic on them.
The girl chatted with her mother about the desserts they had that day, and her father chimed in a few words, a rarity for him. No can do however; a conversation between girls is forbidden to men.
Both of them deliberately ignored the father, who clicked his tongue just as the girl’s classmates did, pouting away. He’s probably not angry. It seemed he was enjoying the fact that he was teased by his daughter and wife.
It was a little gaudy, and the girl laughed.
Her mother laughed too.
And the sleeping Umi curled her lips happily.
Everything then vanished.
It all happened in an instant.
Bright white lights filled her vision, followed by a tremendous impact. After that, the girl didn’t know what happened.
It sounded like something broke.
It sounded like something tore apart.
It sounded like something shattered.
The screams of her parents were overwhelmed by something louder. The still young little sister probably couldn’t scream.
FInally, there came the sound signalling the end of everyone important to the girl. Ahh, to be precise, not a sound rang, but rather, it vanished. Yes, her intimate parents met their demise.
How much time had elapsed?
Huuu huuu.
The girl’s parched throat finally exhaled, and she gained strength to open her eyes again. Three times, her eyelids tweaked, before she opened them.
The world of hue was basked in flames.

The girl thought that she had to hurry and find her family, but her body couldn’t move at all. It was as though that wasn’t her own body. Just moments ago, she was freely moving her limbs, yet at this point, she couldn’t move them no matter how much strength she exerted.
Heat was the only thing coming out from her mouth, screaming at her immobilized body and numb heart.
She wanted to keep living.
She did not it to end like this.
For it would be too much.
She had lots of things she wanted to do.
She wanted to see the large fireworks during the summer vacation once again, to read books, to wear cute clothing, and to visit the theme park again. She wanted to experience romance with an amazing boy, just like those stories.
Yet everything was to be taken away mercilessly.
It was a place nothing could reach, not even rage, sadness, or any gut wrenching scream. ‘Death’ was waving before her eyes.
“I don’t want this.”
The girl eked out a silent voice with all her might.
“I hate this.”
The world was dyed in tears.
And contrasting the girl’s emotions, her consciousness was fading. It seemed the end was looming.
No.
She was unable to open her eyes.
No.
The light was closing.
No.
She could not make a sound, and she did not know if she was even breathing.
No.
Even if it was a hellish place, she wanted to remain.
She wanted to remain on this world.
Suddenly, the girl resisting death heard something.
No, perhaps it was wrong to say that she heard something. It was a question without the concepts of words or voice.
She merely felt it.
She realized that she could live if she nodded.
And thus, the girl consciously reached her hand out.
Desperately, yearningly, she stretched her arm forth.
“I want to live.”
The girl grabbed the light.
She recovered to find herself lying on the bed.
The white ceiling, the white room.

Strangers came and went. These people were all dressed in white clothes. The girl was simply asked for her name, and nothing much about the accident.
While feeling relieved, she felt disgusted to be abandoned.
She brought the unpalatable food into her mouth, and spent the entire day watching the TV. There was a news report of a traffic accident involving a certain family of three, and the news reporter continued with a monotonous tone. A tired truck driver, having driven for 36 consecutive hours, passed out for mere seconds, and four lives, including his own, vanished from this world.
It was a mistake. That should not have been the case.
There should be four in the family, and Umi should not have been an only child. She had an older sister. However, what the newscaster said was reality to the world.
A burning world of red.
Nobody in the world knew that in the place so difficult to breathe in, a girl miraculously survived. No, nobody knew that a certain girl was there. The fact had disappeared.
The girl wanted to scream, but she kept her mouth shut at all costs. She clung onto the bedsheets firmly, leaving firm wrinkles on it, enduring.
For it was the path she had decided.

Then, a week passed after the accident.
On that day, the girl saw the clock hands pass. The second hand tickered, and time easily passed. 10.54pm. In a split moment, the world was rewritten again.
It was the second time the world was rewritten.
In that case, she could no longer remain.
The girl, sneaking into her blanket, was prepared to leave the hospital. However, she kept waiting for the moment, wanting to personally witness what would happen.
And thus, the incident happened.
Initially, she heard a scream, one of a familiar voice. It was that of a young nurse, who was kindest to the girl in the hospital. She gave the girl sweets, and when the girl said that she liked to read, the nurse lent her some interesting books. This time, the nurse was shocked to find the girl, looking at the latter like an existence of unknown origin.
Upon the scream, people gathered.
Amongst them was the girl's physician.
The girl knew both the doctor and the nurse's names. In her mind, she tried to say them. This one's Kanzaki-sensei. The nurse is Tanio-san.
Kanzaki-sensei approached. The girl got up from the bed, and stood up, facing the doctor. The doctor then said,
"Who, are you?"

These supposedly weightless words brought more weight upon the girl than what she could imagine.
The girl stumbled out of the ward room in a daze, and the people surrounding her opened a path, shunning her. She left, looked around, and found the words on the nameplate had vanished. Before she went to bed, she affirmed that her name was there. That was 30 minutes ago. During that time, nobody passed by before the ward room.
The girl descended the stairs, and left the hospital through the back door.
There was no family.
No place to return to.
All she had was her own life.
Thinking about this, the girl's feelings exploded. There was no stopping. The pented emotions remained roaring within her, and if she did not let them out, the girl could have broken down.
"Ah, AAAAAAHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHH—"
So the girl screamed.
In the moonless night, the stars were the only ones flickering. The exhaled air became white mist as it was winter, but the snow never fell. Somehow, the girl felt strangely cold. Her throat was fiery.
"AAAAAAHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHH—"
She screamed towards the sky.
She hollered towards the world.
Tears fell from her eyes.
The people who knew of the girl no longer existed.
The girl's me, and I'm alone on this world.
I was at the bench in the small park, munching at the chocolate I received from the boy whose name I knew not of. I took a bite, and was a little surprised, for I tasted sweetness. For many years, I couldn't taste anything no matter what I ate.
For every bite I took, the chocolate got a little smaller. I looked at the shrinking chocolate, feeling sad. Ah, I see. So this is 'sadness'. I never thought I would have such feelings left.
"Let's go."
I had no strength to stand, and I feebly mumbled.
Maybe it's too cold, and my hands were numb, so I couldn't feel anything even after touching it. I was like a corpse, so I thought as I nibbled at the shrunken chocolate. It's very sweet, so sweet that tears are about to fall.
5 minutes passed, and the chocolate entered the stomach completely.
I leaned on the backrest, and looked up at the sky.
The grey clouds drifted away, as though leaving me alone in this time.
Maybe it's because the breeze's too strong, for the clouds twisted at a shocking speed, changing shapes, and finally departing.
"What am I doing…"
Nobody answered me. Well, I knew that would happen.

I was about to toss the crumpled packaging, rolled into a ball, into the trash bin, but for some reason, I held it with both hands, before putting it into my pocket.
After a moment of thought, I put my hands in my pockets, stood up, and began to walk after aimlessly.
There was nothing significant about me not discarding the packaging. However, my current life's basically like that. Just breathing, just walking, just letting time pass. Look, there's no meaning to anything. In any case, even if there is, it'll disappear.
This is the price I had to pay for living on.
The light I grabbed that day was 'something'. Yes, 'something'. Even with all the languages in this world, I probably can't describe that. If I had to describe the closest thing, it's probably a 'miracle'.
And I, who touched that 'something', knew various things.
Like for example, it's predetermined that this existence called the world will move towards its end. Humanity calls that flow fate, or history, and the process doesn't seem like it can be changed.
I kept thinking as I walked on, only for a pebble to touch my shoe, rolling on the ground. Then, a boy behind me kicked that pebble. It rolled into the grass, and a bird that seemed to be in the grass before then flew off.
It all started because I kicked into a pebble here.
The gears of fate are slightly repositioned.
This little distortion may one day cause a huge one in the distant future. It will change something as big as the fate of the world—
I, who should have died at that moment, became an existence that could no longer exist on this world. Thus, all my actions will become a Black Box, with the hidden potential to change the fate of the world.
On the other hand, the act of living is to move towards the future. The future taken from me is meaningless.
Thus, as the price for living, my past was taken away. Before the fang of change could reach the distant future, the source was cut off, and the path to the future is realigned accordingly.
Every Tuesday night, 10.54pm, everything before then will be deemed the 'past', and my existence will be erased from the 'past', all memories of my name, my face, nobody remembers. And then, all discrepancies caused by my disappearance will be ironed out.
All I got in exchange for all that was a mere one week future.
God Himself won't offer an 8th day.
It's like I'm playing Musical Chairs.
Every day, a chair goes missing, and on the 8th day, all of them will vanish.
Game over. To continue, I have to start over again.
I know. I grabbed the light, knowing that would happened.
Thus, I couldn't blame anyone.
I could only continue to live on.

To spend some time, I took the long road towards the station, only to hear a purr somewhere."
"Meow, meow."
It was near the gutter. There was some wild grass there, and I couldn't see what it was, but something's there. I looked around, but there was nobody other me. Meow. That was a sound only I could hear.
I knew that pain.
I knew that loneliness.
I understood that despair more than anyone else
Before I knew it, I had pulled the wild grass aside, looking deep into the gutter.
"Meow."
There was a kitten, a little dirty. It's covered in dirt, and the fur color's not too obvious. It's probably not born for long. Its claws, legs, body are so small, its voice so soft. The blue eyes were the only parts large, like it's looking down on Earth from space, though I never got to see Earth from space.
"Meow."
The cry for someone became a cry for me.
The blue eyes captivated me.
Just me alone.
"Want to come along with me?"
I reached my hand out, touching its fur. It's soft and warm. It fel a long time since I felt warmth.

I took the kitten back to the hotel, naming it 'Shiro'. After I washed it, it showed beautiful white fur.
Shiro's a quiet female cat, so quiet that her purring to me seemed like an illusion.
For feeding, I fed it milk through a pipette. It seemed she hated the milk powder, but once I brought it to her mouth, she obediently swallowed.
Shiro's still young, not physically able, so I had no intention of taking her out. Of course, I never left as I had to take care of her.
I remained by Shiro's side, sitting on the chair, reading to pass the day. Shiro would fawn about at times, tapping my leg, and at such moments, I would carry her and put her on my thighs. She would then fall asleep contentedly. I felt the weight and warmth of life as I flipped through the pages. It had been a long while since I felt the warmth of somebody. I felt that I was being saved by these things.
"If you keep sleeping, you'll grow fat."
Shiro continued to sleep, not purring at me at all. It's a little boring. Hey, let's chat.
"You really have such pretty fur. You're skinny too. It'll be a waste if you grow fat."
"Meow."

You’re noisy, so I got scolded.
She seemed a little annoyed to be disturbed in her nap. That however left me a little happen. There were times when I teased her too much, and got scratched by her. The pain however left me a happy.
After all, a wound caused by someone else is proof that I made contact with someone else.
“Sorry, sorry.”
I gently stroked Shiro’s fur, and she fell asleep again.
“Ahh, I feel like sleeping too.”
I closed the book, and put it on the table, closing my eyes. I was sitting on the chair, with Shiro sleeping on my lap. It was a difficult posture to fall asleep in, but I could easily fall asleep that easily. My consciousness swayed between soberness and delirium. Then, I quickly fell asleep, as though falling into a trap.
A long time passed.
When I woke up, I found the surroundings to be completely covered in darkness. Maybe it’s due to my weird posture that when I woke up, the first thing I felt was the pain on my neck, and then my back. My legs were completely numb, but Shiro’s still sleeping on my legs, so I couldn’t move. I extended my arms, and after much effort, I got the remote control on the table on my hand, pressing the button. After that, the orange light lit the 4 tatami-sized room like a weak flame.
“Nn.”I stretched my back to relax my stiffened muscles, and checked the current time. 10.57pm. It had been 3 minutes past 10.54pm. Seemed like I slept for almost 8 hours.
It’s Tuesday. The correction had been executed.
I had to hurry and leave. But before that, I had to wake up this lazy, sleepy cat.
Will Shiro be shocked when she wakes up?

She has no memories of me after all.
But as Shiro’s a kitten, she probably wouldn’t ask me “Who are you?” right?
Once I feed her, she’ll cling onto me again.
“Hey, Shiro.”
I called for Shiro, stroking her fur. But the next moment, I was taken aback, and reeled my hand back.
Shiro’s body was stiff and cold.
“Shiro, are you dead?”
I softly asked, wanting to affirm it.
But Shiro would never ever purr again.
That was the answer.

Shiro surely was fated to die in the gutter. Probably due to starvation and the cold. I prevented its death however.

However, a creature fated to die will never get past the point of death, and continue into the future.
The reality deemed that for the week, I never fed Shiro. The world was corrected.
Shiro's body lost its lifeforce and strength, and felt a lot lighter than when she was alive. It's said a soul's 21 grams in weight. But is that true?
Tears trickled down.
The tears landed on Shiro's soft fur.
"Ahh, uuuu."
I gritted my teeth, holding back my sobbing. Normally, on a typical day, I could easily shut up, but for some reason, I couldn't stop myself even after exerting myself much more than usual. A muffled voice kept coming from between my lips.
I wanted to stop my tears.
Because they were not pretty at all.
I was not crying for Shiro. I was crying for myself. The loneliness I felt after this warmth I finally managed to obtain had disappeared, and the uneasiness in my heart fell in the form of tears. My chest was aching. The softest part of my heart was being gorged at, aching.
I kept shaking, gritting my teeth, grabbing my arms firmly. It really hurt. But my heart was aching infinitely more so.

I couldn't just leave Shiro's body as she was, and on the next day, I started looking for a place to bury her.
If I died, I won't wish for anyone else to see my rotting body. That's definitely what Shiro thought.
I bought a cardboard box at a supermarket, and laid out a pretty, white bath towel, putting Shiro on it. She looked like she's sleeping. If I talked to her, will she open her eyes? Will she purr towards me again? She can scratch me again.
Even though I knew it's impossible.
In the end, I decided to bury Shiro's empty husk in an empty field not too far away from the station. While there's a 'private property' signboard there, who cares? I dug at the ground with a scoop.
"What's she doing?" While on the way, I sensed a few curious looks at me, only for them to look aside. It's a piece of land with few people passing by, but it didn't mean there wasn't anyone. There wasn't any weirdo who came to talk to me though. Everyone just glanced at me, and then looked away.
I kept progressing on, but as I kept going, my shoulders got increasingly heavier due to the fear and fatigue of wondering if this will be erased. Any actions I do alone might be deemed as 'never done'. If there're many witnesses, the possibility of that goes higher.
But even so, I could only press on.
For I had nobody else to ask.

Over the past few years, my physical strength had been declining, and maybe that's why I needed lots of time to dig a hole big enough for Shiro to rest in. Suddenly, there was a sharp sound shaking my ears, dragging on.
"Ow."
It seemed I dug into a rock buried underneath. The hand holding the scoop was aching. I fell onto my butt, which I normally wouldn't do. I gulped down the tea from the PET bottle I bought. After some time, the numbness in my hand vanished.
Suddenly, I heard a voice above me.
"What are you doing?"
I looked up, and found a boy of similar age to me standing there. He was wearing a black shirt with red trims, a large shoulder bag slung over. It's a familiar I saw before.
"Not you again?"
"Eh, have we met before?"
The boy looked incredulous.
Ah, I see. Two rewrites happened since we met. There's nothing about me in his memories. He doesn't remember anything about me, neither about the part when he gave chase after me, or that he gave me chocolate.
But if it's him, so I thought.
If it's him, the goody-goody stranger who gave me chocolate, maybe he'll listen to my request.
I stood up, dusted the sand off my butt, and lowered my head. I forced a smile, probably, since it's a little stiff. Well, it's not like I got a choice, since I had long forgotten how to make a natural smile.
"Sorry. I think I'm mistaken here. Actually, the cat I raised here is dead, so I'm making a grave for her. If you don't mind, can you help me out?"
I thought he would have been a little unwilling, "Got it." but he responded. He nodded, put his shoulder bag down, and pulled out the scoop on the ground, beginning to dig at it. This time, I made sure that I wasn't sitting on the ground, watching the back that was surprisingly more reliable than it looked.
"Hey, why did you talk to me?"
The boy continued what he was doing, and answered,
"You looked like you're about to cry."
"You're lying. I wasn't, making such a face."
I touched my cheeks with my hand, and my fingers weren't wet.
I guess, I didn't cry after all?
"Yep. But that's how it looked to me. You're just looking troubled there, helpless, but you're still working hard, giving that determined look. I can't just ignore you when you look that way."

"I get it. You're a weirdo."
"How rude."
"Nobody said that about you?"

He avoided the question.
“…Well, it’s like I don’t have a passion or discipline to do anything, so I guess that’s why. I think I really admire those that are completely different from me, the ones who seriously insist on doing what they want, fighting on. It’s stubborn, but I really hope such people don’t give up, don’t look back. I’m just pushing my ideals on others, and in turn, I’ll help out.”
“Is there such a person before?”
I nonchalantly asked.
“That person, as in?”
“The ones that look cool, but end up messing up.”
“I get it. It’s really tough, unbearable. But even so–“
His voice slowly got softer, before it vanished. However, his words had some passion within them, I felt, and it seemed to me that he’s not someone without passion or discipline. It’s just that he thought of himself as such a person.
Or maybe, he hadn’t encountered something that could get him fired up.
“Hmm. In that case, it’ll be great if you find it one day.”
“Eh?”
“I’m talking about you finding what you say you want.”
The boy merely chuckled, not answering anything. He continued to work silently.
Finally, before me was a deep hole. It’s enough to bury Shiro in.
“Is it her?”
The boy looked towards Shiro in the box.”
“Yes.”
“And the name?”
“I call her Shiro.”
“Because she’s white?”
“Yes. Simple right?”
“Well, I think it’s a nice name. They say that the name describes the person after all.”
After burying Shiro’s carcass into the ground, we clapped hands together to pray. We didn’t build a grave. I was the one praying, but I didn’t know what to pray.
“This little one was alone in the gutter when I first met her.”
The boy just listened, instead of looking at me with suspicious eyes when I suddenly spoke up.
“A week passed since then. It seemed like I was called by her. When I asked her, you want to come along, it purred. But Shiro’s life was just extended by a week. So I thought. If she stayed in the gutter for a week, would she be relieved a little easier? Say, is there a point to extend her lifespan for just a week?”
It’s the same thing about my life.

I watched my parents and Umi die, and cheated death alone. But reality's not some kind thing. I didn't know when it started, but I was wondering why I wanted to live on.
In the Winter Skies, I discovered Sirius' powerful flow.
In Greek, it's a blueish white light that means scorching. In that case, I should have disappeared in that flame back then.
But the reality is that I'm still alive. I chose to live on my own will, and since the night I lost everything, I've been looking for my reason to live.
"But even so, you accompanied her, right?"
The boy, who had been listening quietly, spoke up,
"If there's any meaning to letting Shiro live for a week longer, I'm guessing that meaning is in your heart. She got your love, so much so that her death caused you sadness. That chance alone makes her happy, I guess. Ah, yeah. That's because,"
–You won't forget this week, right?
He concluded.
"Is there a purpose of living?"
"I guess so. I don't know what Shiro thinks, but this is what I think. If someone's able to remain in a certain person's heart and be loved, that's a blessing to Life."
The boy's words sank into my heart fully.
I see. If I'm able to remain in a certain person's heart, then there's purpose of having lived. If I can do it, maybe I can find a little meaning to my life.
I looked towards the boy next to me. This goody-goody boy probably can remember me no matter how many years after I disappear.
I've been thinking how to use my life.
Yep. I've decided.
"Say, what's your name?"
"Haruyoshi Segawa. You?"
The boy's mere existence took the shape of Haruyoshi Segawa in my heart.
I didn't say this to Segawa-kun.
Hey, Segawa-kun.
Please like me.
Please mark me in your heart, and remember me forever.
When that reality happens, surely, I'll–
Thinking about that, I beamed,
"I'm Yuki Shiina. Please take care of me."

消えてしまった言葉の、その先を

Contact.137

Chapter 5: Contact 137 – Beyond the Vanished Words

“May I sit here?”
I was approached by a girl I never met before.
It happened when I was in the free space of the town library, solving the summer assignments.
The clear voice was like a wind bell echoing.
I looked around, and found the other tables occupied by other students, who like me had laid out their textbooks, studying. Of them, many of them were using the red book series, preparing for the college entrance exams. These guys will be how I look a year later.
“Please do.”
I was about to clear up the unused textbooks from the table, “It’s fine.” but she waved her hand, “I’m just reading. This much space is enough. Are you doing your summer assignments?”
“Yep.”
“I’ll just read quietly then.”
She put the index finger on her lips, seemingly shushing me. She revealed her pearly white teeth, and the first impression she gave me was a little immature. Even so, she seemed a little older than me. Disposition-wise, she seemed rather relaxed.
As she said, she’s basically quietly flipping through the pages, but sometimes, she would chuckle softly, or hum a little. I was captivated by her voice, looking towards her, and then, I lowered my head. I felt a little apologetic, sorry, so I apologized. She looked a little shocked, widening her eyes.
“Why are you the one apologizing?”
She chuckled. Seriously, I want to hear her voice, so I thought.
This wish was fulfilled earlier than I expected. I went to the toilet, and upon returning, found that she wasn’t reading her book, but at my assignments.
I returned to my seat, and she whispered to me in a secretive manner,
“Your answer for the third question is wrong.”
She took my mechanical pencil, and began to write. Within a minute, she arrived at a different answer. I had a look, and found her answer to be exactly the same as the one on the answer sheet.
“You’re bad at maths? Shall I teach you?”
She smiled slyly, her slender fingers gently pulling her hair behind her ears.
Suddenly, there was a sweet fragrance. What’s this scent? After some thought, I got the answer–
It’s the fragrance of sakura.
It happened in summer, during my second year of high school.
That was how I met Yuki Shiina.
I inhaled the morning air, and ran out of the house.

Summer assignments, stationery, wallet, smartphone, and towel. For every step I took, the items in my bag touched, clanking away.
I strode forth hard, and the world began to spin a little faster. So I kept running, my emotions rising. On the way, I turned right, and went down a jogging alley by the riverside. Light sparkles appeared on the river surface, and it seemed the air was filled with the light of summer. Fuu, haa. Sweat started appearing on my forehead.
After I abandoned track in middle school, I would regularly run, but my body was extremely sluggish compared to my physical prime. Well, this should be enough, I think. Everything has become a thing of the past.
On the last summer day in middle school, I surpassed the one I 'admired'. Before I realized, the finish line was behind me. Ah, I finally did it. That was what I thought, for that particular moment, there was nothing I looked forward to. However, I was past the finish line.
That was the place I finally reached after running for three years in middle school.
I felt something exploding in my heart.
It was something I had already given up on.
It was something I let go of.
It was something that had ended.
I slowed down, quietly waiting for those things to calm down. Beside my feet was a distinct black shadow. Crickets could be heard from afar. My memories were slowly awakened.
It seemed I was alone when I broke my record on the hottest day that summer, ending off my track club career, I guess?
While thinking about this, I suddenly heard a voice.
"What are you doing standing in the middle of the road?"
That shocked me.
It was my classmate, Akane Rindou.
Her hair, a little shorter than the average girl, covered her forehead, and large beads of sweat flowed down her forehead.
It's summer vacation, but she's wearing a uniform instead of her plain clothes. Is she attending club activities?
"Just spacing out."
Ahahaha. I tried to laugh it off, but Akane asked worriedly.
"You got heatstroke? Are you alright? Need me to buy you some water?"
"I'm going to the library now. There's a water cooler at the lobby, don't worry. Are you attending club activities now, Akane?"
Akane was on her bicycle, and the basket at the front had a bag messily stuffed into it. It's the orange bag she would always bring for her club activities, and I saw it all the time.
"Lewd."
Akane interpreted my stare to be something else, scolding me.
"What?"
"You're looking at my bag. You know what's inside, right?"

“Your swimsuit, right? I’m just looking at the bag. Don’t call me loud.”
But upon hearing my reply, Akane leered cheekily.
“Too bad. It’s underwear.”
“Why?”
“Because I’m already wearing my swimsuit.”
Akane lifted a little of her skirt. The black school swimsuit could be seen.
“Akane, just a reminder, don’t do that even if it’s a swimsuit underneath. Isn’t there an old song with the lyrics, ‘men are all perverts, be careful out there’.”
“See? You’re a pervert after all.”
Akane gleefully grinned. It’s my complete defeat.
I recovered to realize the thing that was raging within me had disappeared completely. Instead of that, there was something a little more honest, trying to peek out. It’s a swimsuit, a swimsuit. The underneath of a skirt that was not to be seen to begin with was getting my male instincts riled up.
Well, I can’t help myself here, right? So I muttered and defended myself. I’m a healthy high school boy in his second year after all.
“Thanks.”
I sheepishly said, and Akane immediately froze up, running away from me.
“P-per-pervert–!!”
So, why are you calling me a pervert after I thanked you?
After thinking for a moment, I realized my verbal gaffe.
Am I an idiot? Saying thanks after seeing an upskirt? That’s perverted of me.
“No, it’s different, Akane.”
“What’s the difference?”
She sounded really repulsed.
“I’m lewd, but I’m not a pervert.”
“How’s that different?”
Akane went a little further away. Ah, I said it’s different, it really is. But the more I denied it, the distance between us increased. At this point, it’s a shouting distance between us, rather than a talking distance.
“Hey–pervert–!”
“Stop calling it as if it’s my name. That’s not what I’m called.”
“Hey, lewd guy. You remember the promise two days later?”
Ahh damn it, can’t deny what I just admitted.
“Remember!! 6pm at the temple, right?”
“Yeah–! I’m–!”
“Hm?”
“Looking forward to it!!”
“Got it!”
“I’ll be wearing a yukata, so look forward to it, pervert!”
Once she said that, Akane peddled off without hearing my answer. I watched her cycle off towards the school, thinking about needless things.
Ahh, it’s really unnecessary.

Do people go commando when wearing yukatas?
I was at the water cooler of the library lobby, drinking. The cold water slipped through my throat, into my stomach.
Back then, I had trouble using it, as I had difficulty lowering my head to drink. The water in my mouth always flowed out due to gravity.
When did I become capable of drinking like this?
This memory remained in a corner of my hazy consciousness, and remained different to extract. It's like eating, going to the toilet alone, or riding a bicycle.
I guess it's the same, that somehow or another, I learned how to do it.
After quenching my throat sufficiently, I went to the self-study room. I pushed the glass door aside, and the air conditioning met me. It felt really comfortable.
I found Yuki at the table by the wall.
On the first day we met, she had two books on the table, and was reading one of them. It had been three days since we met, but she had not progressed, and the reason was me. Ever since that day, I had been bothering her with my assignments. Maths especially was a bother; without her help, I wouldn't be able to finish most of them.
"Good morning."
I approached Yuki, and sat opposite her.
"Good morning, Yoshi-kun."
"Sorry for being late."
We didn't agree to a time to meet up, but I apologized. I felt that since I had owed her so much, and showed up late, it was unbecoming of me.
I left home earlier, and ran over because I didn't want to be late, but my conversation with Akane today caused me to be later than expected. I'll leave home a little earlier tomorrow, so I decided.
"It's fine. Don't worry. I just arrived myself."
"But I can't keep a girl waiting."
"Hm hm, you're pretty sincere, Yoshi-kun. You're the same as before."
"Eh?"
"Nothing. Anyway, have you solved yesterday's questions?"
"Nope. I just don't get it. The given method was correct, but the answer just don't match."
"Hmm, you're always making some simple mistakes Yoshi-kun. If you can't get the correct answer, it's normally because of that. Look."
Yuki took the notebook, looked for less than a minute, ahh, and blurted.
"See? It's a simple mistake here."
Yuki looked a little dumbfounded, and pointed the operation symbol.
It seemed I forgot to put a minus sign.
Ahahahaha, I tried to laugh it off, only to be smacked on the forehead by Yuki. A beat later, I instinctively held my forehead. It didn't sound heavy, probably because she held back.
"Sorry."

“Be careful next time.”
“Alrighty, sensei.”
Yuki might have liked the ‘sensei’ part a little too much, for she gave a dazzling smile.
“Good boy.”
We spent the entire time studying until closing time, but the sun didn’t set even then. I could see it fully, clearly.
The setting sun colored the world vibrantly, dragging our shadows.
I accompanied Yuki to the station, like usual, and she stepped on the torso of my shadow. The place stepped on was right at my heart.
“What are you doing?”
“Stepping on your shadow. Now you’ll be like me, Yoshi-kun.”
“Eh? Is there such a rule for shadow stepping? I remember the rule is more like tag, whoever shadow gets tagged becomes it.”
“What? So you’re not going to be like me, Yoshi-kun?”
“What do you mean, like you?”
Yuki put her index finger on her chin, and teased,
“Errm, like a pretty girl?”
“Stop bragging.”
Ehhh, I karate chopped her head, and she squealed like a pig, Ow ow, that’s violent. You’re terrible, hitting a girl. She kept grumbling, and I continued to listen to her delightful voice, remaining silent.
A pouting Yuki was very cute, and I just kept staring at her.
We continued walking, and the position of the shadows changed. Yuki’s shadow shifted to my feet, while I was following from behind.
“Now you’re it, Yuki.”
“Umu.”
We continued walking, checking the position of the sun was right beneath our feet as we tried to tag each other. A second ago, I thought my shadow was moving towards Yuki, but at the next second, Yuki’s shadow shifted towards my feet. Even at different laces, I could see many different sceneries.
From time to time, we would turn left, then right, and into the alleys. We were just focused on the positions of the sun, and before we knew it, we didn’t know where we ended up at.
I was the first to realize.
“Yuki, you familiar with this area?”
“Nope. No idea at all.”
“Well, it’s not too far, so we should be fine. Let’s walk back.”
“You’re right.”
I turned around to leave, but Yuki suddenly grabbed my hands, her fingers intertwined with mine. At that moment, the nerves in my body froze up.
Yuki’s fingers were twitching clumsily, trying to ease my tension, and once she figured out how to interlock the fingers, she grasped my hand firmly.
Our palms were thus touch each other’s.

“Eh?”
“Ah, sorry, I’m scared of going lost, so.”
“Erm, are you worried about that?”
“No. Erm, it’s a habit I had since young. I held hands with my little sister, just making sure she didn’t get lost.”
“I see. Well, I get that experience.”
She had no intention of letting go, so I didn’t say anything else, and held her hand gently.
I didn’t know how much strength I should use, and it’s difficult trying to figure that out. My little sister Natsuna had a smaller hand than Yuki, but it’s a completely different situation. I was a lot more nervous holding Yuki’s hand.
“A little tighter.”
“Eh?”
“I know you’re worried, Yoshi-kun. You want to treat me gently. But right now, please hold my hand a little tighter, like when you grabbed mine at the convenience store.”
“Did that happen?”
Hearing that, for some reason, Yuki exerted more strength in her hand, seemingly angry.
“Ow.”
“This much strength is also fine.”
“But won’t it hurt?”
“I want you to hold my hand…tightly. Don’t let go.”
“Got it.”
So I cautiously exerted more strength into the hand. My palms were starting to heat up, my cheeks hot, and so were my ears. I was quietly hoping that the hot palm wouldn’t let go. What’s this?
The name of this heat is–
“Yep, it’s nice to get lost once in a while.”
Yuki nodded with satisfaction.
“Eh, ah, yep. I guess it’s nice to do something irregular once in a while.”
“This isn’t what I mean.”
We walked back for a short while, and saw the familiar road. It seemed we just went deep into a side path away from the usual road. Going straight down, we could see the public hall, and we arrived on the main road.
“What? We aren’t exactly lost after all.”
Yuki suddenly waved her hand, smiling at me. My hand was pulled over, and I ended up waving as well. Ahahaha. Well, Yuki’s happy. I ended up swinging my hand. Yuki’s small body never fell over, and was pulled up again due to recoil. Ahahaha. I ended up laughing as well.
I thought it would continue, but Yuki quickly stopped.
She stopped swinging, and stopped walking as she looked at the billboard of the public hall. Is there something rare there?
“What is it?”

“That.”
Yuki pointed at the poster of the local summer festival. The black paper contained a photo of the fireworks. At this time of the year, such posters would be pasted all over the shopping streets and the like; thus, it was not a rare sight.
“Ahh, the Nobume festival? It’s two days later. I–“
“Say, Yoshi-kun, if you have time.”
“I agreed to go out with a classmate though.”
Yuki, having made up her mind, called out to me, and my trailing words overlapped with hers.
“”Eh???””
The reactions, responses and emotions were all the same. However, Yuki calmed down before I could. I couldn’t; my heart was feeling all chaotic.
“When did you?”
“Eh?”
“When?”
“Ehh…two nights ago. I was supposed to go along with everyone in the class.”
“Two days? It’s summer vacation, I got careless.”
Yuki looked up at the sky, seemingly frustrated by something as she closed her eyes. Her front hair was dropping forward, onto the face. Well, I found her straightened neck to be beautiful. She frowned, let out a sigh, and let go. Her body temperature became distant.
“…Guess the promise is gone.”
Yuki left me behind, and left. I could have said “Wait for me”, but I was still confused, unable to say such simple words.
A little distance away from me, Yuki turned around, looking at me. As the light was shining on her back, I couldn’t tell what was the expression she made.
“Goodbye.”
Yuki then turned to leave again. As she said goodbye, I naturally thought we would meet the next day, so I waved to her, byebye,
But on the next day, and the day after, Yuki didn’t show up at the library.
“If ya don’t wear this, it’ll be see through.”
I heard a voice when I was wearing the yukata over the slip. It’s a distinct, raspy voice of an old person, of an unknown dialect. Yes, yes. Put the hands through the sleeves, and pull. Isn’t this good now? Straight out that side. Can’t not dress up there. Yep, looks good.
I looked around, but naturally, I was the only one in the hotel room.
This is where I should wrap around.
It’s been a year since I wore a yukata, but I managed to wear it successfully with the voice of the old granny guiding me. It’s a dark blue yukata, decorated with red and black goldfish swimming in a river. It was something the old granny left for me, despite me only meeting her once, and not knowing her name at all.

I spun around before the mirror, checking for any wrinkles on the yukata. Nope, perfect. It's a pity, but it doesn't seem to match the mood of this Western styled room.
The yukata really seemed befitting of the old, nostalgic house the granny stayed at.
It was a year old, last summer, when I met that old granny.
That day, I was about to go for the summer festival with Yoshi-kun. If we mention about summer festivals and fireworks, then yukatas should be mentioned as well. So, I went to a common old house.
Actually, I was always curious about that place.
There was a signboard with the words 'Yukata/Kimono Rental'. I nudged aside the fence that was waist high, and with a creak, it revealed the path linking towards the house. The old granny was at the house at the end, flapping her fan.
She narrowed her eyes, and because of the wrinkles, for a moment, I couldn't tell where she was looking. The pure white hair looked well taken care of, silky and glittering.
"Whatcha. Who are ya?"
Her voice sounded harsh, but there was some warmth in it. Why's that?
"Erm, I saw the signboard outside. I want to rent a yukata from you."
"Signboard. Singaboard. Ahh, that. Beencha while since I did that, ya. Sorry."
"Eh, I see."
I lowered my shoulders dejected. I was really looking forward to wearing one.
Despite her saying sorry, the old granny was fanning away happily.
"But Missy, ya're pretty. Want to be a little cuter, ya?"
"…Yes."
"For a boy?"
"Yes."
"Ya like him?"
The old granny beamed, but unfortunately, it's a little different.
"No. But I want him to say he likes me."
"A bad girl you are, ya."
"You think so?"
Of course, I knew that, but I pretended not to.
"Well, it's better for a girl to be feisty, but well, ya have to dress yourself up better. This old granny ain't able to wear it anymore, so guess this is fate, ya. Here's something good for ya, Missy."
Righto, the granny was slow to get onto her feet, and went from the porch to the house. I didn't what to do, so I stood there blankly. After a while, the granny called me,
"Stop standing around. Come here. This old granny will dress you up good."
I did as the granny told me to, and went from the porch to the house. There were few belongings, let alone furniture, and it seemed only the bare

necessities were present. There was a classy looking cabinet amongst these belongings, and the old granny was carefully rummaging through it.
The room was filled with the unique smell of an old house. The air was thick, filled with many various things, life, age, death, a compression of human life.
I looked around the room, “Ah, here, here.” The granny muttered.
“A little old, ya, but still wearable. Come on, strip and wear this.”
The granny pulled out what was obviously an expensive dark blue yukata.
“Eh?”
“Hurry.”
With the granny’s strict, relentless voice beckoning me, I stripped myself, as she ordered me to.
And right when I was about to put on the yukata.
“Goodness, if ya don’t wear this, it’ll be see through.”
Saying that, the granny handed me a slip. As it was to be worn by the sleeve, the slip dropping from the chest to the waist looked really pitiful. I was a little hesitant, wondering if I should wear it, but I obediently wore it in the end.
“Yes, yes. Put the hands through the sleeves, and pull. Isn’t this good now? Straight out that side. Can’t not dress up there. Yep, looks good.”
The granny chose not to lend me a hand, and repeatedly reminded me when I made mistakes. While I was wondering how to tie the obi, she asked,
“Ya’re going to Nobume-sama’s festival, ya?”
“Yes.”
“I went there with a few others when younger.”
“Yes.”
“But ever since those elders left, I never went again. The fireworks looked so colorless to me.”
“Is that so?”
“Not that I’m old. Just a matter of feelings. That’s wrong. Yes, hold it there ya.”
“Like this?”
“Ya. Then pull it back. Right, done.”
Before I realized it, I saw myself in the mirror. I was a little touched.
“Hm, how pretty. Any boy will fall for such beauty. Go out there and make him say ‘I like you’. Ahh, go out there in this yukata with a cute smile next year, and the next.”
I thanked the granny, and went to the place I agreed to meet with Yoshi-kun.
Once he saw me, his eyes widened. I had never seen him like that before. After then, he shook his head like a drenched puppy. So cute. I was hoping for him to say such words, so I was a little unhappy about his response. I guess I’m a little happy to see his blushing face though.
We walked down the bridge, side by side, waiting for the fireworks as we ate shaved ice.

“You know, Yuki? The shaved ice syrup’s all the same, just different colors.”
I stood next to Yoshi-kun, whose tongue was colored lemon, and brought the blue ice into my mouth. It was chewy initially, but the more I chewed, the ice melted, and became textureless.
“I see.”
Actually, I knew that.”
It was written in the novel I lent Yoshi-kun, but he didn’t know that. The reality’s probably changed such that he ended up borrowing the novel from the library.
“I did read it in a novel before.”
“So that means this is the same flavor as that.”
“Most likely.”
“I want to try.”
Before I got Yoshi-kun’s approval, I took a scoop of lemon ice from his cup, using my spoon, and ate it. Ah. he exclaimed. I found it really sweet.
“How is it?”
“Hmm, can’t tell. How about you try it?”
This time, I took a scoop of my ice, and reached it towards him. At this moment, he was a little flustered, but I pretended not to notice. What is it? I tilted my head.
Two seconds later, Yoshi-kun gave up as he bit on my outstretched spoon.
“How is it?”
“Yeah, can’t tell. It’s like the same flavor, but a little different.”
“Well, sweet is sweet.”
We continued with some idle chit-chat, and a firework bloomed in the air, as though ending our conversation before fading. The loud echos shook our heart, and the fireworks, colored just like our tongues, gradually colored the world differently. Blue, green, yellow, red.
“So pretty.”
I marvelled.
“Yeah.”
He too said.
After that, things naturally developed.
“I want to see this again with you next year, Yoshi-kun.”
“Okay. Let’s watch next year.”
For what was probably the first time since the accident, I looked forward to seeing the future beyond that moment.
Well, that future never came.
I was alone, wearing the same yukata, and went to the shrine alone.
For every step I took, the clogs a little larger than my feet clicked.
I arrived at the old house that had been sold, and suddenly stopped in my tracks.
The fence was locked by metallic wire-like things. It was like this ever since a few days past the festival last year.
–Go out there and make him say ‘I like you’.

The smiling old granny with a few mere teeth left was no longer around.
This yukata alone was the only proof of me interacting with her.
“Sorry granny. You put in so much effort to doll me up, but I couldn’t do it.”
❀
I went to the shrine, and for some reason, my feet felt heavy.
It’s not that I was unhappy about going to the festival, but I’ve been like this since yesterday. My mind was always thinking of a certain girl.
“Oh, you really came, Segawa.”
The classmates gathered before the shrine perimeter called out upon seeing me.
Typically, I wouldn’t participate in such group gatherings, so they’re probably shocked to see me.
I would normally go alone, and they probably had the impression that I liked to be alone. It was the same last year at the Nobume Festival. I ate shaved ice alone, and watched the fireworks alone.
The guys were all dressed the same, either with shirts matching pants, or shirts matching jeans. A few of the girls were wearing yukata. Speaking of which, Akane did mention that she’s wearing a yukata.
“Hey, that’s rude. I said I’ll come, so I came.”
“Why are you so angry?”
I started sounding harsh for some reason, and a few others pulled their distance away from me.
“Well, Haru might not be used to this. Maybe he doesn’t know how to react.”
Hooking my neck with that meaty arm of his was my friend, Takuma. Yeah, so he said up close to me, sounding a little intimidating and concerned. It’s too immature for me not to change my attitude after knowing that. I relaxed my shoulders. It’s rare for me to be invited out, so I should just enjoy it a little.
“Ah, sorry. Actually, I didn’t progress much with the assignments. Just a little annoyed.”
“Heh, it’s rare to see the model student Haru unable to work.”
I understood what he was getting at, so I graciously went along with the flow.
“You trying to pick a fight? You’re the one with better grades.”
“Well, I’m a genius.”
“Hey, you guys wanna beat Takuma up?”
Saying that, a few of the boys deliberately cheered loudly in agreement.
I’ll smack him good. Righto, a blood festival. I could hear such cruel words beyond my imagination. Wait, hold on, seriously, don’t do this. Ow. Which idiot hit me there? Takuma was surrounded by the guys, yelling away; I met him in the eyes, and found him still laughing away. I nodded at him. The awkward mood from before was gone in the noise. This should be good.
Look, it’s important to keep going until the very end, but we’re still kids. There’s no need to be so stubborn.

Takuma then mouthed to me, help me out here already. He blinked a few times, giving me a few clumsy expressions.
Naturally, I shook my head.
As for what I should do, the situation's beyond my control. You can't be serious. Having said such words of despair, Takuma's massive body crouched over as he covered his head, disappearing as he continued to be beaten by everyone. I clapped my hands together. Namusan.
Suddenly, I sensed a stare.
I looked over, and found a girl a little distance from us. She appeared to be looking at something dazzling as she narrowed her eyes. She was wearing a dark blue yukata, which depicted a river with red and black goldfish.
I wanted to call out her name, and I took a step out from the circle. The moment I was about to call out her name, my name was called.
"Hey Haru–"
The one calling me was Haru. As she had said, she too was wearing a yukata. It's faint green, with green and yellow Morning Glories. The bright colors were befitting of her lively self.
While I was distracted by the voice, the girl vanished into the darkness. The place she stood at was empty.
I quietly called her name.
But it was pointless.
"Yuki."
And Akane, who arrived next to me, tilted her head in confusion?
"Yuki? It's summer now."
While we were chatting, Takuma finally managed to return from Hell, and called everyone over. Let's go. So Yuki said, and teetered towards everyone.
I took my time as I went over.
Finally, I turned back towards that place with some hope, but it was empty.
The Nobume Festival is an old summer one with at least 150 years of history.
Apparently, this festival was to celebrate the shrine lady named Nobume who married the dragon god disrupting humanity. However, the dragon god here refers to the river, and this festival's held to comfort the souls of the girls who became human pillars to stop the flood.
Like the previous years, people were beating drums and blowing fluters for Nobume-sama.
I heard the noise from the center of the festival, and sat alone on the stone steps, laying out my prizes.
Five butter grilled chicken, baby castellas. For us high school kids with limited pocket money, it's common sense for us to share money for such events.
Everyone else went off to buy food that's easy to share.
After waiting for a while, Akane alone returned. She was holding two Ramunes, three beef sticks, and a packet of takoyaki. Kept you waiting, she said bashfully.

“This is for you. Keep this a secret from the others.”
Saying that, she handed me a light blue bottle.
“Can i?”
“Yep. But it’s just for you and me. Finish it before everyone comes back.”
“Got it. Thanks. Is everyone else buying stuff? It’s been a long time. Is it really that much trouble?”
I thanked her, receiving the Ramune. I suppose it’s chilled in iced water, since it felt cold. I held the glass marble down with my tongue, and drank the soda water. The bubbles exploded, causing me much bitterness inside.
“No, I don’t know whether they’re worrying too much, or that they’re being busybody.”
“What do you mean?”
“Nothing. If you don’t understand, forget about it. You don’t need to know.”
Akane sat next to me, blushing as she nodded a few times.
While sitting next to her, I looked at the bustling sceneries of the festival, mesmerized while my mouth was on the Ramune bottle mouth, sipping little by little. There were various voices, dazzling colors that caught my sights, and many people gathered around. Various things filled the place.
So I continued chatting with Akane, waiting, but none of my classmates showed up.
“Aren’t they too slow? I’ll go look for them–“
Saying that, I was about to get up, but Akane said,
“…I feel a little giddy right now.”
“Eh? Ah, it’s a festival. It’s normal to feel agitated.”
“Hm? Really? I guess if you say so.”
A light breeze blew by, gently stroking my hair.
“But you seem a little distracted today.”
“…I don’t think so.”
I was being honest. I wasn’t lying. I was really enjoying the day, fooling around with Takuma and the others, enjoying the sights of the girls in yukata, basked in the mood of the festival. I was really enjoying everything, but–
“Then, where are you going?”
“I said I’m going to look for them.”
“Really? That’s not it, right? You might not have realized it, Haru, but you’re looking distracted. What are you looking?”
Once she asked, I found myself speechless.
Distracted, huh?
Maybe it’s as Akane had said.
I was having fun, joking around with everyone, but my mind was preoccupied with a certain person. I was looking around, even when we were queuing at the stores, or when waiting on the stone steps with everyone. I wasn’t actually looking for my classmates. I was looking for Yuki
There was only one girl I wanted to see.
My heart recalled the softness of the palm, the feeling, the warmth.

Once I realized those feelings, my body began moving.
“Sorry, time out.”
“Eh?”
“I’ll go call someone. Regroup with everyone first, Yuki.”
Wait, while Akane called out behind me, I didn’t stop.
I kept running, looking, and wanted to invite her to see the fireworks. I wanted to use all the courage I mustered to invite her.
Will she be shocked? Will she be happy? If she’s happy, then great. If she’s able to smile happily, that’s greater.
I went into the crowd, looking around, searching. The scenes changed as I moved. I looked around, but no luck, so I kept running, repeating.
On the way, I bumped by Takuma.
“Haru, what are you doing here? What about Akane?”
“Sorry, I’ll explain later. It’s urgent.”
“Ahh? Seriously, where are you going? Hey, where’s Akane?”
Takuma’s unhappy voice faded behind me.
Where is she? Where is Yuki?
The world’s quiet as ever. It felt as if time stood still. I quietly made a countdown. 3, 2, 1, 0. Once it ended, I heard a loud bang ripping through the silence, and at the next moment, there were cheers.
It seemed the fireworks had started.
Triggered by the sounds of the fireworks, the imagery from before appeared in my mind. He’s surrounded by the other classmates, looking really happy, having fun. For some reason, I felt my heart aching when I saw that.
I couldn’t really handle my own feelings as I looked up to the source of the sound.
The red fireworks lit the darkness.
But the light immediately vanished.
Eh, what’s wrong? It’s weird.
I tilted my head.
The colors of the world were gone.
And so were the sounds.
Just last year, I found the fireworks to be beautiful, but at this point, they just appeared bland, black and white to me.
It felt like I was watching a black and white TV without sound.
So I lost all interest, looking up at the poster before me reluctantly. The poster had the picture of last year’s fireworks. It’s black and white here after all. Ahh, it’s so boring. I’m a little bored. I was the one who made the promise first last year.
And with a voice nobody else could hear, I muttered,
“Idiot.”
❀
The starting fireworks got me anxious. The explosions seemed powerful enough to rip through the night air. BANG. BANG. As the fireworks rang, so did my heartbeat become louder.

In another thirty minutes, the fireworks will end. There was someone out there yelling Tamaya during the display, while others elsewhere were yelling Kagiya with a similarly loud voice.
I ran to the back of the arena, the bridge that's the best place to view the fireworks.
She's not here.
I hurried to the crowds heading to the station. There were kids around, along with grandpas holding the kids hands. There were five elementary school kids. The ones taking photos with smartphones were probably college students.
And while everyone was looking at the sky, I was the only one running on the ground.
The throat's hurting more than it's boiling. My heavy breathing couldn't calm down. Ahh. It feels so difficult to breathe. Hah, hah. No matter how much I gasped, the oxygen wasn't enough. My head was dizzy. It's tiring. Hah, it's unbearable.
I pinched my sweat soaked shirt hard, and wiped off the sweat dropping into my eyes. Even after being so tired, I kept running.
I couldn't find her at the station.
Not at the library either.
Ahh, the star mine's starting. Various voices echoed as the fireworks lit the sky with their distinct colors. It's almost the climax.
"Shit."
I cursed as I continued running towards the alley I brought Yuki into.
We once held hands, shaking each other's arm back and forth, laughed, and spent happy times together.
The flames bloomed in the pitch dark sky, and the rain of light followed. The breathtaking sight glided by like a shooting star. As I kept running, I quietly prayed for a wish towards the hundreds of trailing lights.
–This isn't some ridiculous wish. So help me out here.
–Bring me to a girl.
I passed the alley, and continued running, before I stopped.
The faint lights of the telephone booth shone upon the adjacent building I was familiar with.
I heaved a sigh of relief.
Yuki's here.
She's standing at the display board before the public hall, her hand touching the poster of the summer festival. She's wearing the yukata I saw two hours ago, but she wasn't looking at the fireworks blooming in the sky. Her sidelong face was colored blue, yellow, green and red.
"Yuki."
I felt exhausted, probably due to relief. I had no strength to keep running, so I stumbled over a step at a time, approaching her.
"Why are you here?"

Yuki's face was showing much confusion and shock, and she frowned, before looking through me with a piercing glare. Her face was as pretty as usual, and her raising her eyebrows slightly left me rather intimidated.
But even so, I couldn't back down.
"Look, I'm here to hear what you didn't finish."
The trailing words that vanished when she spoke up at the same time I did.
"You're only talking about that now? Yoshi-kun, you meanie."
"Yep."
Another five steps. Yuki's face got lower.
"You knew what I wanted to say."
"I guess."
Another four steps. Yuki got bigger.
"You knew what I wanted to say, but you didn't say anything."
"Sorry."
I took the third step.
"And, and, you're a guy, and you want a girl to say that?"
Two steps left.
"You're despicable."
With all my desire, I took the last step.
Yuki was within reach.
"So I'll say it. Can you come watch the fireworks with me? If I'm with you, I'll be happy."
"…"
"Can't I?"
"…No."
"Why?"
"Because the fireworks ended."
Yuki lifted her lowered head. There's signs of sadness and anger in her eyes, but at this moment, she was giggling away.
"You're a meanie too, Yuki."
As Yuki looked up at the sky, little fireworks bloomed in the sky with a bang. Standing next to Yuki, I was the only one who saw her black eyes, lit by the red lights.

Contact.213

二百十四回目の告白

Chapter 6: Contact.213 – The 214th Confession

“Who are you?”
I was approached by a girl I never met before.
It happened after I left Yoshi-kun, and went off to the hotel before the station.
The girl’s voice was filled with the natural feistiness, along with some uneasiness.
Suddenly, I recalled the boy I was with till just now.
An uneasy premonition left my mouth dry. Most of my hunches about anything good hardly come true, while the bad ones strike so often, I could strike the lottery. It’s ridiculous, this time, definitely–
“Who are you?”
I lowered my voice, trying to ensure that she wouldn’t determine my thoughts. Most of them wouldn’t talk whenever I did this. It seemed there were such pressure from me whenever I did so.
And it seemed the girl before me was intimidated by the pressure in my voice, for she widened her eyes in shock.
I wanted to turn away and leave immediately, but I was grabbed by the elbow, unable to slip away.
“What?”
“Erm.”
Her voice lacked the feistiness from before, but even so, she didn’t back down, and instead stared into my eyes intently. The eyes were as dazzling as the light of the summer sun; hot, sharp, mesmerizing.
It was then that I realized again that I couldn’t run away. No matter how I tried to shun her, she’s not going to let me go until I gave her a proper answer. I’m a girl, and she’s a girl. Either way, I knew that.
“Anyway, please tell me your name.”
“Ahh, I see. Sorry. I’m Akane Rindou. And, erm, you?”
I had some vague recollection of the name.
Yoshi-kun mentioned her many times.
The premonition I had was increasingly becoming a reality. It felt as discomforting as something rough licking at my neck and back.
But even so, I reined in the various things rising up my heart, let out a sigh, and brought my dangling hair to the back. I didn’t know if I looked sufficiently conceited. At the very least, it’ll be good if I can hold her off for a while.
“I’m Yuki Shiina. So you’re that Akane-chan? I heard from Yoshi-kun.”
“Who’s Yoshi-kun?”
“Haruyoshi Segawa-kun. It’s how I call him. You’re from the same year as him, right?”

Even as a female, Akane-chan's a pretty girl.
The long slender limbs were nimble. Beneath the long eyelashes were fiery, proud eyes, but there was some honesty hidden within them, and the weakness that accompanied it. The soft hair's something to be envied.
I guess most boys can't resist such girls.
My throat was increasingly parched.
"Then, is there anything you want with me, Akane-chan?"
"Ermm, yeah. Actually, what's your relationship, with Haru, Shiina-san?"
Dooo.
A car horn could be heard from somewhere. It seemed near, and far.
It happened in my 19th winter.
That was how I met Rindou Akane.
This isn't something that can be settled with a few words, so I told Akane-chan, and without for her reply, I went to the cafe I visited several times.
Once I saw the indoor lights of the unimpressive looking, empty cafe, I heaved a sigh of relief. I nudged the door aside, and the bell chimed.
Welcome, the big sister approached with a smile. For two please, I told her, and went to the place by the window, as I did the first time I visited this place with him.
"Erm, Shiina-san."
The moment I sat, Akane-chan called my name.
Luckily, her voice was soft enough that I could pretend to ignore. I ordered a hot black coffee. Akane-chan didn't, and stared at me intently.
Once the big sister left, I asked with a harsher voice than expected.
"Have you been to this shop before?"
"Nope."
"I see. I visited this place with Yoshi-kun before."
What am I being gleeful for? I'm the one losing if I say such things here. The fact that I came to this shop with him no longer exists on this world.
I feel gaudy and tragic for having to rely on such facts.
"I hope you'll answer my questions."
She went back on topic, maybe unhappy with what I said.
Her voice remained soft after all.
"…What?"
"Your relationship with Haru."
I didn't want to order anything more, but I was slowly flipping through the pages, with the menu in hand. Curry rice, sandwiches. Yoshi-kun liked the Napolitan pasta. Hey, you know this, Akane-chan?
"Even if you ask me of our relationship, I don't know what to say."
I flipped to the next page. There's Blue Mountain coffee, Kilimanjaro and others. Various coffee names were listed. On the adjacent page, there were names of black tea. I remembered Yoshi-kun once going something like, who would order such stuff, maybe some company boss.
"A friend?"
"Who knows?"

“Acquaintance?”
“Well.”
“…Not his girlfriend, right?”
I slammed the menu instinctively. Uh oh. No choice left. I could only put the menu back at its original position. Finally, I looked towards Akane-chan.
“Hey, I say, does that have anything to do with you? You’re just ordinary classmates, right?”
“We’re not just classmates.”
“Then what? Acquaintances? Friends?”
I retorted back with the words she said ten seconds ago.
“You’re not his girlfriend, right?”
“Not, at all.”
At this moment, Akane-chan’s eyes were blazing with a completely different emotion. Rage, or rather, hatred. Ahh, this makes it easier for me. We can fight.
For I would find myself pitiful in the face of that honesty. I can no longer look at anyone with such eyes again.
“Then it doesn’t matter what my relationship with Yoshi-kun is now. I don’t have anything to say to a mere classmate–“
Before I could finish, a sound rang.
Pak.
I realized that I got slapped, for my cheek was feeling hot.
“I said I’m not just a classmate. I’ve always liked him.”
“But that’s just what you wish.”
Once I answered calmly, Akane-chan raised her hand again.
This time, I was mentally prepared, for I knew she was at her limit.
But her raised hand slowly dropped, weakly.
She bit her lips hard, her eyes overflowing with tears as she carelessly grabbed her bag. Sorry for hitting you, she said, and ran off.
Phew, I heaved a sigh, and my shoulders turned weak. My hands were shaking. It’s a good thing she hadn’t realized it. I really didn’t want to do that. But since she wasn’t going to let me go, I had no reason to back off. Especially since she’s a girl with so much charm, it was vexing.
Since neither of us were going to back down, we’re just going to be enemies for eternity.
Soon after, the big sister brought the coffee out. She didn’t say anything, and put it on the table with the usual smile. Ahh, why did I order this again?
I sipped the piping hot coffee, and grimaced.
“Ow.”
My tongue was stinging.
This coffee was so much bitter compared to everything else I had ever tasted.
It was morning. I woke up, and found the fragments of my dreams slowly fading away.

It happened from time to time. Like the snowflake grasped in my hand fading away, I couldn't contain the fragments within my memories.
In my dreams, I was holding hands with someone. I was smiling.
But when I woke up, I couldn't remember who it was. The emotions in my heart too vanished. Finally, I too forgot about having such dreams.
This is probably how I vanish from his memories.
Yoshi-kun, who was in his second year of Middle School, is now a third year in High School.
Ever since that, he, who had been shorter than me, grew much taller, and I had no choice but to look up to him. Looking at how his face is no longer effeminate, I guess nobody will say that he looks like a girl now.
This is the proof that four years had elapsed, a period that was not short in any way.
But in these four years of Yoshi-kun, I never existed.
Every Tuesday night, 10.54pm, the world will erase my existence.
Completely without a trace, like white snow melting into the Spring. There is no sign of my existence anywhere in the past world.
And every day, I would encounter Yoshi-kun again and again.
All for one purpose, to get Yoshi-kun to like me no matter what.
I finished my shower, and began my thorough preparations. The hairstyle Yoshi-kun likes. The clothes Yoshi-kun likes. It seems he likes girls wearing slightly oversized coats. It seems he thinks it's cute that I reveal some fingers from my sleeves. They call it Moesode or something. I forgot when it was when he told me about that excitedly.
I can't understand. But well, since he likes it, so be it. I'll be cute for him.
After a long time, I finally dolled myself into a fashion Yoshi-kun would like.
And with heartfelt feelings, I sprayed the sweet fragrance.
It was the sakura perfume he said he wouldn't forget.
When I left the hotel, the sky's completely grey.
It seems like it'll snow again.
Let the snow pile up, so I prayed.
I left the hotel, and made my way back again, tossing the red gloves onto the bed. I didn't know what to do with the pale hands now that I had removed my gloves, so I bent my reddened fingertips, before heading to school to meet Yoshi-kun again.
Till this point, I had talked to Yoshi-kun 213 times.
But never once did he say that he liked me.
❀
I heard a sharp screech from the chair grinding the floor, and lifted my head up from the book.
The third year classroom had many empty seats, for it was the time when students were free to attend school. Nijou, the one seated before me, hadn't been around for a week, so it's been a while since I heard him.
However, sitting down wasn't the classmate with the iconic spiky hair. It was a girl with shoulder-length soft hair. If she hasn't spoken up, she would

be a cute, pretty girl, but she had no intention of hiding her crude personality as she beamed.
“Yo, Haru.”
“What, Akane?”
“What do you mean, what? I’m here. You got a problem with that?”
She’s the one who seemed to have a problem as she pouted with a sulk. If it’s the usual routine, the follow up will be a little punch. Honestly, I want to avoid that.
Luckily, there’s something else to discuss, so I made use of it.
“Not really. Just a little shocked. It’s rare to see you let your hair down, and I couldn’t tell. It gives a really different impression. You kept it longer since half a year or so, right?”
“Ahh, yeah. My big sister told me how to take care of my hair, and I’m working hard on it. It’s fun, though there’s some troublesome part about it.”
Ever since Akane retired from club activities in the summer, she’s been acting more like a girl.
She kept her hair longer, and seemed have been putting on makeup. It’s not too obvious if I didn’t pay attention to her, but a little bit of makeup increased her charm dramatically. All I knew was that over the past half year, five people tried to woo Akane.
She fiddled her fingertips, maybe because I was staring at her, and she asked,
“Do you find it weird?”
She asked with some hesitation. I guess a charm of hers was that her expression was always changing, so I thought blankly.
“No, not at all. I just find it cute.”
“Really? Then, great. Eh, yeah. Forgot what I wanted to talk about. I just chatted with Takuma. Want to go to the shrine to pray today?”
“Didn’t we go already?”
“Any, way, we can go there many times, probably…”
Is that so? Won’t God feel annoyed to be pestered by countless prayers? Or will he fulfill wishes because he feels the passion in those praying?
Well, anyway,
“No, I’m not going today. Got an appointment.”
I had to shake my head and refuse.
Because I had an appointment with a girl I just met.
Once I said that, Akane frowned, and the mood changed completely. Well, it’s like a summer downpour. Some feeling of a crazy thunderstorm coming. Her face was completely covered with grey clouds.
“…With Yuki Shiina-san? She’s a pretty one.”
“Huh? How do you know?”
“Ah. I guess so. You’ve been with her recently, right Haru? Guess you have lots of free time before the exams. We’re examinees. There’s no time to go out and play with such a ridiculous person, you know?”
“That’s not it…”

“Anyway, it’s a promise.”
I wanted to retort, but Akane’s words swallowed me. Everyone in class was looking at us, for her voice was loud. Several of them, all girls, were watching with glittering eyes. They’re hoping to see what’ll happen.
“No, just wait a minute, Akane.”
Akane left the classroom, as if she didn’t hear me. Even so, I had to shout.
“I got a prior appointment!”
The 3.30pm bell rang, and I got up, moving from the electric pole to the school gate. I promised with Yoshi-kun yesterday that we’re going to meet at the school gate.
I tidied my hair with help from a hand mirror, rolled up my muffler, and breathed some air onto the aching, frozen fingertips. They were warmed for a little moment, only to cool down immediately. Once Yoshi-kun comes, let’s go and get something warm to eat. I’ll treat him as reward for his hard work.
But soon, it was past 4pm, 4.30pm, and Yoshi-kun still didn’t show up.
I wasn’t really worried. I understood he had reasons for not showing up. For example, there was a chance he was asking his teachers about questions he solved.
But my legs ignored all sense of logic as I went off towards school. I was thinking about the girl I met the previous day. She’s pretty. Once I recalled the honest eyes, my chest ached. It was painful. Hey, Yoshi-kun. I’m in pain. Why is this?
As I got closer to school, there were more students around. I hastened.
wIt was the first time I went to pick him up at school.
For I never once entered Yoshi-kun’s school life.
Because of my presence, Yoshi-kun lost lots of time.
He should be spending time with his family and friends, but ended up lonely. In his memories, he was alone in many scenes.
So at the very least, I thought I should take away his memories in school.
And for me, at this point, I wasn’t in the mood to abide by the rules I set.
I entered the school gates. I wasn’t wearing a school uniform, and didn’t look like a teacher, so I was really standing out. Various stares were stinging at my skin. I was used to this, but on this day, I was a little disturbed.
I was starting to think, in an unbefitting manner, that if I’m a student here, nobody will be looking at me like this.
❀
No matter how many times I tried talking to Akane, it’s useless. It’s rare to see her this angry. There’s no doubt I hit a sore spot on her, but I didn’t know what it was. Immediately after class, I went to talk to her, but she hid in the girls toilet every time, and I didn’t get the chance to talk to her.
After at least 6 times, it was after school.
“So I said that I got an appointment already. Listen to me already, Akane.”

I went to the corridor linking the club building and the school building. The bamboo floor rattled slightly due to our weights.
“I heard that. So you’re saying that you prefer to go out with a girl you just met instead of me?”
“Not really. How about tomorrow? Can we go to the shrine tomorrow?”
Akane might have been annoyed about hearing the same words over and over again, and finally turned towards me.
Then, something unbelievable happened. I thought Akane would be really angry, and was prepared to be glared at. However, she looked towards me, giving a stunned look, and after a while, glared at me. What’s with that look?
“…Got it. Then, lend me some of your time. Just a little while. Over here.”
Then, she grabbed the tip of my uniform, and went further in.
“Wait, Akane. I can walk by myself. Don’t pull me like this.”
I tried to steady myself, making sure not to fall over while being dragged off by her.
I was in school, looking for Yoshi-kun. I passed the courtyard, and went into the opposite corridor, hearing a few voices. They were from behind me.
Some people were on the corridor I just passed.
“So I said that I got an appointment already.”
I sought out the source of the voice.
But I never could look back, and I hid behind a pillar. What? Why? There’s no need to hide. I had to talk to him. Say something.
But my body wouldn’t obey.
“Listen to me already, Akane.”
“I heard that. So you’re saying that you prefer to go out with a girl you just met instead of me?”
“Not really. How about tomorrow? Can we go to the shrine tomorrow?”
Tomorrow. Once I heard that word, I shuddered.
Tomorrow, I’ll vanish from his memories. That ‘tomorrow’ will be taken by someone else. I suddenly lost my balance, and fell over. I couldn’t exert strength in my legs. I barely manage to lift myself off the wall, and looked towards the source of the voice, only to meet one person in the eyes.
She was a little shocked as she glared over. Then, she said, probably for me to hear.
“…Got it. Then, lend me some of your time. Just a little while. Over here.”
She then pulled the boy by the shirt, and left.
They went away, and left behind was an emptiness contrasting the commotion from before, spreading as though left behind there.
Why was it that even though I wanted to cry, I couldn’t make a sound?
I stood there for about two minutes or so, stunned.
Even so, I summoned my courage, grasping at straws as I went over to the disappearing voice.
If I didn’t do so, I would lose something.
That premonition forced me to move.

Both of them vanished into the school building with few people.
It seemed to be the clubroom building. On the day of the culture festival, Yoshi-kun introduced me around school, and I recalled his voice, “I sometimes play in this classroom. Keep it a secret.” He put his index finger on his lips, shushing me.
I’m not even a student here. Who am I supposed to say this to? I was surprised, but I was happy that he was willing to share a secret with me, yes, so I obediently nodded. If I remember, the classroom’s–
I ran up the stairs with large steps, and at the turnaround, I took large steps up again. Grabbing the handrail, I exerted strength into my thighs as I moved into the second floor. I didn’t meet anyone on the way. I went to the third floor, just like this. My footsteps alone echoed on the corridor.
Finally, I arrived before the room furthest West of the third floor.
It’s a classroom that’s no longer used. However, there’s human presence inside. I couldn’t hear clearly, but I knew there’s talking. Yoshi-kun’s definitely inside. Let’s go. If I go now, I should be able to make it.
I did my best to maintain a smile as I put my hand on the handle. At that moment, a loud voice rang.
“I like you, Haru. Please go out with me.”
Her always earnest eyes must be captivating Yoshi-kun.
I moved my hand away from the handle, and ran down the stairs.
Where exactly was I going? There’s nowhere for me to go in this world. The place I’ve always been had been taken away.
But even so, I prioritized escaping, rather than staying.
❀
The door to the empty classroom closed, Akane and I were the only ones left in this space.
At that moment, the mood around us changed.
Even this dullwitted me knew what was going to happen from now on.
“Haru.”
My name was called, yes, and I responded, remaining rigid. Poof, Akane snorted.
“Why are you nervous?”
“Well.”
“Don’t worry. I’m not going to eat you up. Just listen to me, okay?”
“Got it.
I nodded, and faced the girl before me. Our eyes met. Something was about to begin, or rather–
“Yeah. Thanks. Um, I’ve always been interested in you, Haru. But I just noticed it during the last summer vacation of middle school. Remember when we met once in the courtyard back in middle school?”
Was it when Akane was thinking about whether she should give up on swimming?”
“Back then, you told me, I can hear you out a little at least. You might have thought it wasn’t anything much, but for me, that’s not true at all.”

Our surroundings was a little dim, so I hadn't noticed, but Akane's legs were shaking. Her honest eyes were filled with a flickering light. However, she's the type of person who's able to overcome her fear or nervousness.
"I've been thinking about it a lot. About what happens after I graduate from high school, or if I get into university. But I guess this is the last chance. I'm going to say it now…"
Akane then said those words, with a loud voice typical of her,
"I like you, Haru. Please go out with me."
Her words were like a stone thrown into my heart. It entered with a plop, and the ripples spread. In the ripples that spread, I saw my future with Akane.
We seemed really happy.
I didn't hate Akane.
Well, to be honest, I do find her cute.
I was able to talk about many things with her, and we like the same type of foods. We share similar friends, and we had fun playing sports on our rest days.
There were definitely times where we quarrelled. Lots in fact.
But after quarrelling, we're always able to patch up. I don't know how many times we argued, but we're always able to smile and patch things up until now. I can't really say that I like Akane as someone of the other gender, but I'm confident that we can continue to slowly make up for what's lacking.
Because there's clearly the time we spent together.
But even so, why?
At this moment, I clearly heard someone call for my name. It's a name I shouldn't be able to heard.
"Yoshi-kun."
There's only one person in the entire world calling me that.
I recovered, and heard footsteps coming from somewhere. The footsteps got further. It's impossible, but there's only one girl on my mind.
And that girl wasn't Akane.
"Sorry."
Before I knew it, I lowered my head.
My chest ached. Maybe it's because I was running, and my lungs took in lots of cold air. Yes. That's definitely it. There's no other reason.
Because I don't like Yoshi-kun.
Anyone can do. It's just that Yoshi-kun seems to fit what I want, and so happened to be before me. That's why I chose him.
WIth my frozen palms, I did my best to wipe my twisted vision. I didn't know if I used too much strength, but my eyes were a little hot, burning with pain.
I should have worn my gloves after all. Haah. It's difficult to breathe. My throat's thirsty. I gritted my teeth hard, just as the night when I screamed into the sky.
"Idiot, idiot idiot idiot idiot idiot idiot idiot idiot–"
Who exactly were these feelings, these words directed at?

Akane? Yoshi-kun?
Or myself?
I repeated the words over and over again, not knowing why.
The word that signified a fool was delivered countless times into the world, melting into the darkness of the night.
❀
My mind was preoccupied with Yuki.
I was just confessed to by a female friend I knew for a long time, and yet I, being so heartless, prioritized another girl instead.
An hour passed since the meeting time, and as expected, she's not there. I felt my heart ache.
Deep within my ears were the echoing footsteps of a certain person leaving, and that got me to move.
It was the first time in my life–
The first time I yearned to meet someone.
I wanted to meet Yuki.
So I kept running.
In the end, I couldn't figure out what this lingering pain was. I kept running, running, until I reached an empty land not too far away from the station.
It wasn't long ago that the billboard on this land was changed. In the coming Spring, it seemed there'll be a skyscraper built here. Another thing important to me will be taken away.
This is where Shiro lies in eternal rest.
Gasping for breath, I tried to sort out my breathing. My mouth was really dry, so I kept swallowing saliva. Why? Wondering that, I kept rubbing my eyes, but it didn't vanish.
It should be reality.
I asked reluctantly. I was asking the person who somehow arrived at that place before me, who shouldn't be at this empty space.
"Why are you here?"
He had his palms put together, as though praying. Once he heard my voice, he lifted his head.
It's Yoshi-kun, wearing the school coat he had been complaining about. He didn't appear to be returning home anytime soon. At his feet was that old school bag.
"A long time ago, there's a pretty cat I buried here. I so happened to think about it when passing the road there, so I decided to come here to put my hands together and pray."
Saying that, he stood up, dusting his knees.
"Found you. Since I couldn't find you at the place we agreed, I came to look for you."
"I'm going back."
I turned around, and hurried off. Two meters away from the road however, I was grabbed on the hand. His hand was really cold, probably because he was outside the entire time. And I, who's supposed to be colder, was a little

warmer because I had been touching my hands. Everything's different from the past, the hand temperature, the conversations, the one being chased. I was the one chasing him up till now.
"What are you doing?"
"Sorry for breaking the promise. You angry?"
"Not at all."
"I'm apologizing to you. I'm really sorry."
"Sorry about what?"
I instinctively scolded him.
"Aren't you always like this? Haven't you broken the promise countless times already? Why are you apologizing now? Let go. My hand hurts!"
I knew I was just throwing a tantrum, but I had no choice. I had yet to sort my feelings out. His words were just adding fuel to my strung emotions.
I needed some time to recompose to my usual self.
So let go of me.
"Wait. Sorry. Don't cry already. I never thought you'll be this sad."
Ah, you're still saying such things now? Do you need to repeat this misunderstanding again?
I couldn't take it.
I was unhappy.
I was hurt.
I felt the heat of the tears down my cheeks.
"Because it's not like this. Because you don't know. That's why I'm unhappy, that's why I'm sad!"
I hammered at Yoshi-kun's chest hard. For every hit I delivered, my hands hurt. I was bleeding inside. But even so, I couldn't stop myself from hammering away.
"I'm lonely because you just wouldn't like me. I'm suffering."
Yoshi-kun remained silent as he let me hammer away.
"Because, you belong to someone other than me, and tomorrow, my daily life with you won't be there, Yoshi-kun. I feel cold, scared–"
I kept hammering until the very end, thud, causing loud thuds. My hands touching Yoshi-kun were hot. Thud. I pressed my forehead on his chest. My forehead's hot. I felt Yoshi-kun's heartbeat. This is what I want.
This is what I lost.
"So that's why you're crying?"
Breathing alone took a lot out of me, and I could only nod.
It's really weird.
Yoshi-kun should be the one suffering. Yoshi-kun should be the one crying. Yoshi-kun should be the one remembering my name.
Why do I have to suffer so much?
Why do I have to endure such painful memories?
Why? Why? Why am I the only one remembering Yoshi-kun? It's unfair. Why is it that anything about me just keeps disappearing?

“Look, I get what you’re saying. It’s true that I might not know anything about you. No, I really don’t know anything about you. But,”
Saying that, Yoshi-kun passed, his hands pressing down on my cheeks. With a gentle, irresistible force, he lifted my head. These are the gruff hands of a man. My tears wet his hands. He smiled, and then frowned.
“I don’t agree with the last two lines you say, so I’ll respond to that.”
“Heh?”
Yoshi-kun curled his middle finger in, and held it back with his thumb. The next moment, the middle finger was flicked hard onto my forehead. Tck. It didn’t sound like my forehead was hit, even though it was. I felt my forehead hurting, and hurriedly covered my forehead.
“Huu. What are you doing?”
“You’re the one who beat me up first. I’m hurting too.”
“But you’re a guy.”
“It doesn’t matter. Anyone being beaten will hurt.”
As for me.
I ended up yelling.
“I’m hurting a lot more than you, Yoshi-kun. You’re going out with that girl called Akane-chan, right? She confessed to you, right?”
You abandoned me. I’m alone because of you, you know?
“How do you know?”
I didn’t say that I eavesdropped on them. While I remained silent, well, Yoshi-kun sighed.
“Yeah, she confessed. But i rejected her.”
“Why?”
Faced with my question, he, who got beaten up and scolded, faltered a little. I didn’t know what caused him to make such a face.
After some thought, he closed his eyes, and then a while later, opened them, saying,
“Well, I like you.”
I felt my heart stop. It’s that shocking. I didn’t understand what he said. What, did he just say?
“…Huh?”
“I just said it, right? I can’t agree with the last two lines. I like you, so I don’t intend for belong to anyone other than you.”
It seemed I didn’t mishear.
“When did that happen?”
“Probably from when we first met. No. I guess I fell for you from when you first talked to me.”
These should be the words I really wanted to hear.
But someone in my heart was insisting that it was out of pity.
If it’s pity, I don’t need it. This kind of confession is meaningless. I’m angry, I’m crying, and this gentle him’s just telling me this.
“Enough with the careless words!”

If he didn’t say that he likes me from the bottom of his heart, I can’t remain there. If there’s no passionate heat that burns the body, there’s nothing to chain me down. One day, I’ll vanish.
“I’m serious.”
“You’re lying.”
“I’m not lying.”
How many times does he think I tried this?
I did various things to get him to like him. But every time, never once did he say, I like you. The feelings he had for me weren’t enough to get him to confess.
This time, we’re just strolling around after school, nothing out of the ordinary, and there’s no way he’ll like me because of this. In reality, he said that he likes me. I can’t believe it. I don’t believe me.
“How do you expect me to believe you when you don’t know anything?”
“Then what do you want me to do before you believe me?”
After thinking, I said. I felt like I was giving up on something.
“I’ll tell you something. It’s not something that exists anywhere in this world, but it’s definitely something that involves me and you. If you hear this and can say something stupid like ‘I believe you’–“
I didn’t continue.
There’s no way he’ll believe.
Believing me will mean doubting the world, doubting his memories.
Compared to the world I speak of, it’s obvious which one he’ll be more likely to believe in.
That’s why I never mentioned it once.
He kept staring at me, not averting his eyes once. I took it as a yes, and slowly began to explain.
I explained the many things that happened ever since the accident on my 7th birthday.
A long time passed by the time I was done talking.
There’s another ten minutes until the end of the world, or rather, the reset of the world.
“So you want to believe what I just said?”
“I believe you. No, I want to believe.”
He answered without hesitation.
“Why can you still say that?”
Hearing what I said, Yoshi-kun looked up at the sky.
Behind the grey clouds, Sirius must be glowing away, and so should Betelgeuse and Rigel. Once, we spent time looking for constellations. We had no knowledge of them, so we just kept looking at the picture books, searching for them.
You don’t know about this, right?
Soon after, Yoshi-kun muttered. Ahh, seriously, you’re a troublesome woman.”
“Wh-what? Why troublesome?”

“You are. Well, I think you’re cute because of that. I guess it’s a game of, whoever falls in love first loses. Hey Yuki.”
He scratched his head, smiling, and stared right at me.
Just like that Christmas Eve four years ago.
“It’s true that I do find what you say weird. What you say is different from my memories, and normally, it’s hard for me to believe you fully. Truth be told though, no matter what you say is true or not, it doesn’t matter to me. Either way, I’m going to say, I believe you. I don’t want you to misunderstand, this isn’t pity. When I see you in pain, my heart hurts, my heart suffers. If you can smile, I’ll believe in anything. The me who’s been with you all the time has always been like this, right?”
I couldn’t disagree.
Because it’s as he said.
The four years of feelings in my heart didn’t allow me for to refute.
Ah, yes. Yoshi-kun never got to fulfill any promise with me, but he never let me down on any of my wishes. He did everything to fulfill what I hoped for. Whenever I state my frustrations, he’ll help me, and he’ll reach out to me no matter when.
“I guess I’ve liked you all the time.”
These words were similar, but this time, they touched my heart.
The heat equivalent to his palm’s spread within me. I see. Guess I have no choice.
People probably call this warmth ‘love’.
In that case, I too might have been the same. For a very long time.
Before I knew it, the snowflakes flew. The world’s covered in white.
“Speaking of which, you’re a weird on ever since our first meeting, Yoshi-kun.”
I smiled, as he wished, and reached my hand out. He too smiled and held my hand.
My long journey should come to an end here.
I kept living for this moment, wanting him to say that he likes me. Right now, my existence should be able to remain permanently in his heart.
But I have a sudden lingering regret.
I haven’t been able to convey my feelings to Yoshi-kun properly.
That’s why it can’t end here. For us, who kept meeting even though we never got to say goodbye properly, it was a line we had to mark.
“Hey, Yoshi-kun, I–“
But my words never got to reach Yoshi-kun. It just ended. Ah, I see.
Once I saw Yoshi-kun’s face, I understood.
LIke before, he was giving me the look of a stranger. There was no longer the boy who said to me, I like you.
Silent, without any sign, the world resetted.
Before I knew it, our hands parted ways.
Surely, the fact that he held my hand was erased. Even so, there’s still that lingering warmth on my hand.

This is enough.
This alone is enough for me to keep moving on.
My heart’s pounding.
I took a deep breath.
I did it dozens of times, hundreds of times, but even until the very end, I never got used to it.
Whenever I talked to Yoshi-kun when he didn’t know me, I was always tense.
And the words I said were always different. It’s hot, it’s cold, you’re working hard. I even told him, bring me to the movies. Please help me get a book.
Just like that, I approached Yoshi-kun 213 times.
Not once did he feel annoyed by it.
The many ‘hellos’ I said were this clumsy me’s attempts to confess.
I wanted Yoshi-kun to like me, so I kept approaching him. For this reason, I kept meeting him. In this case, isn’t there something simpler and suitable?
I made up my mind.
I slowly opened my mouth. The air shook.
Come on, let’s begin with the first and last goodbye.
“Hey, Yoshi-kun. I like you.”

Contact.214
これは、世界で一番幸せな恋の話

Chapter 7: Contact 214 – This is the Happiest Love Story on this World

“Hey, Yoshi-kun. I like you.”
I was approached by a girl I never met.
It was when I didn’t return home, and stumbled around town.
It was a voice warmth as the spring sun, like the breeze as the petals fluttered.
Thinking back, I felt I was initially mesmerized by that voice.
We were at an ordinary empty space, commonly seen in town. This place had nothing to do with me, other than a white cat which I once buried here.
So naturally, I knew nothing about her at all.
Her skin’s white as porcelain.
She had soft cloud-like silky hair.
Her large eyes were clear and deep.
And a confession from such a girl left my mind completely blank at that moment.
Finally, left behind was an emotion I felt for the first time in my life. It’s hot, painful, but didn’t feel bad. I allowed my to be driven by that heat, and earnestly conveyed my feelings.
And once I answered, she beamed.
She seemed really happy.
Yet, she seemed a little forlorn.
Finally, she reached her little hand forth.
“I hope that you’ll hold my hand willingly.”
I did as she said, and held her hand.
Her hands were cold, maybe because they were bare the entire time. Once both of us held hands however, the warmth spread from there. Making sure I didn’t hurt her hands, I held them carefully and firmly.
“Thanks. Then I’ll introduce myself again. My name’s–“
It happened in winter, during my third year of high school.
That was how I met Yuki Shiina.
The next day, Yuki and I met up at the front school gates.
You’re going to school tomorrow, right? I’ll be waiting for you at the school gates, 4pm. So she proposed, giving me a look of one unwilling to compromise. Because of that, I could only nod my head in agreement.
I left school a little earlier than the agreed time, and found Yuki dressed in a slightly oversized camel-colored coat, waiting for me.
“Yuki.”

I called her name, and she waved her slender hand hard. It's like a puppy seeing its master return, wagging its tail. Every movement of hers was filled with delight.
"Why are you so happy?"
"Because you finally noticed me. You called my name. It's something to be happy about."
"I see."
I reached my hand out, and Yuki held my hand.
"Woah, it's so cold."
"I've been waiting for a long time after all."
"Eh? Did I mistake the time?"
Yuki shook her head.
"Nope. Just that I was really looking forward, so I waited. I've always been like this."
What did she mean by the word always?
"Speaking of which, wear some gloves already."
"If my hands are cold, that'll give me reason, right?"
"For what?"
"To hold hands?"
"You don't have to prepare for that reason. There should be others. Anyway, Yuki, you and I are…well, dating, so you can hold my hand whenever you want…eh, what's with that look?"
Yuki's mouth was half opened as she blinked away. Several seconds later, she burst out laughing. I don't think I said anything funny, right? For some reason, my face was a little hot.
"You're amazing, Yoshi-kun. Yep, we're dating now."
"Are you treating me as an idiot?"
"That's not true. I'm praising you."
"Really?"
"Really really. Now, let's go, boyfriend."
Yuki suddenly grabbed my hand, and went forth. I panicked, chased after her, and walked beside her. Our clasped hands just so happened to end up right between us.
Yuki and I were dating.
But it lasted only for a week.
❀
"Actually, our date lasts only for a week."
After Yuki confessed to me, and we agreed to go dating, she set a time limit."
"No no, wait a moment. What do you mean?"
I asked, and Yuki started to take a deep breath. Following that, she started breathing in and out cutely, her ample breasts expanding and contracting. After doing that for three times, she finally seemed to have made up her mind, her eyes glowing. However, that light immediately vanished from her eyes again.

Nevertheless, she never gave up.
Once again, she took a deep breath, and slowly spoke,
“I need to get one thing clear with you, Yoshi-kun.”
It’s the story of a girl whose existence will vanish like the snowflakes in a week, and her 213 encounters with an ordinary boy.
They had several encounters together, spent time together, and created memories together. But in the end, everything was erased.
But even so, when Yuki talked about that unbelievable story, she was giving a sad, yet blissful smile, just as when she confessed to me.
We saw the flowers in spring, the fireworks in summer, ate lots of delicious stuff in autumn, and went to the seaside in winter, so she said.
“Why the sea in winter?”
“Because I suddenly wanted to go to a beach with nobody around. You were complaining away, saying, if you want to go, it’s better to go during the summer, but you got pulled along by me. You remember, right? Your memories might be a little different from mine though.”
I tried recalling, and it seemed that did happen.
I was alone at the beach during winter.
With nobody next to me.
Naturally, there was only one set of footprints on the beach. I remembered how chilly it was very well. Ah, but when I went back, I recalled buying some delicious oden at the convenience store. I bought a lot, and ate a lot.
What Yuki spoke of ended up like that.
It’s not so much that I forgot everything.
So this girl called Yuki, who should have existed, vanished from the past word, and the new world buried the emptiness caused by her disappearance. As for me, I just took this sculpted, seemingly flawless world as it was. Thus, I never suspected a thing. Or rather, maybe the world Yuki spoke of was wrong, or so the common sense within me pleaded. However–
“So, are you going to believe my words, Yoshi-kun?”
“I do. No, I want to.”
I said. Without any hesitation.
“Because I like you.”
I really liked her little face, her slightly curly hair, her wearing the slightly oversized coat, and the silky fingertips poking out from the sleeves…her chest’s big too, and her clear voice’s fine too. I like everything about Yuki, even the air surrounding her.
She’s giving off the sakura fragrance I like.
That’s what I thought the moment I met her.
It’s like Yuki’s the ideal girl God created for me.
But that’s not it.
Yuki wasn’t like this in the first place. She spent a lot of time trying to become my ideal girl.
Thus, the answer’s simple.

I wanted to believe the four years she told me about. I couldn't deny Yuki's words and feelings with just common sense. For me, what she told me with a smile was the truth.
I suppose that's good enough.
"You're the same as always, Yoshi-kun. A weirdo after all."
"You hate weird people?"
"Nope, I like them."
"Then I guess it's fine to be weird. If you like me because of this…no, if you're willing to smile to me because of this, then I'm fine with it."
And this is how we started our limited period of love.
❀
We left school, and for the entire time, Yuki was feeling pleased. She hummed away. It was a love song commonly aired on the radio during winter. She was humming a love song that was trendy several years before I was born, with that wonderful voice and somewhat offkey rhythm.
We passed the arcade before the station, and then passed the rotary intersection. We glanced back at the old pachinko shop that had closed just last month, arrived at the post office, and made a turn at the third corner. My left hand was still holding Yuki's hand, and her right hand kept holding mine.
In our free hands, we were holding taiyakis. A moment ago, Yuki spotted a shop on the shopping street in operation.
She was watching that little shop with a watering mouth, so I asked, want me to treat you to one? She gave a delighted look, really? And so she beamed like an innocent kid.
Over the next five minutes, Yuki was wondering if she wanted the red bean or the custard cream.
I was intending to buy the taiyaki Yuki didn't buy, so to be honest, the 5 minutes were meaningless. It's simple. There's two of us here, each one of us buys one flavor, and we'll just swap. I didn't say it though, because seeing Yuki troubled like this is pretty cute too.
So Yuki chose the red bean, and I bought the custard cream.
We both had cat tongues, so we waited for the taiyaki to cool before we dared to eat. The crispy skin and the custard cream meshed together, and the inside felt soft. Yep, delicious. I nibbled and enjoyed it slowly, but Yuki finished hers in a matter of seconds.
"Erm, you're pretty fast."
Yuki chewed a few mouthfuls, and heartily swallowed the taiyaki. She then smiled to me, ahhh, opening her mouth. It basically means, give me yours.
"Erm, that."
"…"
"This is mine."
Yeah, I know that. So what? Yuki made such a look as she tilted her head.
"…"
"…Erm…"

“…”
“…Here.”
I completely lost.
Hearing what I said, Yuki finished the remaining 80% taiyaki into her mouth. She puffed her little cheeks, chewing away heartily.
“You’re unexpectedly a glutton.”
I said what I was thinking, and Yuki seemed to be panicking a little. She chewed quicker than before, and quickly finished the taiyaki.
“It’s sweet. I can’t help myself.”
She said that a little faster than usual.
“You say that, but you’re actually worried about what I think, right?”
“Not at all!”
“Really?”
“Really!”
I enjoyed Yuki’s panicked look as I kept walking. Suddenly, something red appeared in my sights. Once I saw the words, I stopped in my tracks.
I see. Next Wednesday’s–
Yoshi-kun, who teased me with a really, really mean joke, suddenly stopped in his tracks. What’s the matter? So I thought, and looked towards where he was looking. I saw a red flag fluttering in the wind, the flag of a little cake shop.
The one to speak up first was me,
“Speaking of which, it’s a week, huh?”
“Yeah.”
Next Wednesday’s February 14. It’s said that’s the day boys really want to eat sweet stuff. Once our date ends, it’ll be Valentine’s.
“If possible, can you gift me chocolate?”
“You want some?”
“Of course. Well, because it’ll be from my girlfriend.”
Yoshi-kun was bashful whenever he mentioned the word girlfriend, and it’s pretty cute.
“Sure.”
Now that he mentioned it, I never gave him chocolate before.
Also, I owed him a huge favor. It’s better to repay what I can.
“I received chocolate from you before, Yoshi-kun.”
“Did that happen?”
“Yep. Once.”
You might not know, but that’s the start between us. The chocolate I received from you was really sweet. It’s so sweet that I’m happy. That’s why I continue to exist.”
“I see. Then, please do so.”
“Yes yes. Look forward to it. Then, take back what you said.”
“What I said?”
“That I’m a glutton?”
“What? You’re worried about that?”

Of course. I’m a girl after all.
❀
That morning, I woke up from my dreams, and saw a world of silver outside the window.
It seemed the snow that fell since yesterday had piled up. The sunlight shining through the clouds were refracted by the white snow, and my just opened eyes were aching. I rubbed my sleepy eyes, left the room, and the cold air that came caused me to shiver and sober up. The wooden floor was really cold. My soles were aching.
Like usual, I descended the stairs with much hesitation, and saw mom sweeping the room without much fuss.
“Morning Haru. Breakfast’s ready.”
“Eh? It’s too early today, right? You normally do that after cleaning up.”
“All because of this snow. Natsuna’s excited so early in the morning. She said she wanted to go out to play, so she made it earlier.”
“Oh, guess I’m lucky then.”
Saying that, I opened the corridor door, and went to the postbox to retrieve today’s newspapers.
Dad’s more terrified of the cold than I am, so in winter, I’m the one collecting the newspapers. Natsuna doesn’t fear the cold, but she’s disobedient.
The little courtyard was covered in white, with a set of footsteps leading outside. Surely that kid ran out while yelling yahoo or something. I could vividly imagine my little sister having fun. Given how deep the footsteps were, it’s obvious she ran out with much vigor.
Uuu, so I groaned, and the white breath I huffed out was blown away by the frigid winds. I pulled the sleeves of my jumper to my fingers, and opened the postbox, reaching for the morning newspaper stored in the clear bag like usual.
Suddenly, there was a voice.
“So you read the newspapers, Yoshi-kun.”
“No, I’ll just check the TV channel column. It’s dad who gets me to take it. Hm? Eh?”
I lifted my head from the postbox, and there was Yuki. There’s a floral fragrance, a little too early for this icy weather, coming from the courtyard covered in white snow. Why’s she here so early in the morning?
“The snow’s piled up, so I came here happily. Yoshi-kun, do you have some time now? Spend time with me.”
“…Have you been waiting for a long time?”
“Nope. I really just showed up. I was ready to wait for two hours or so, but thank goodness you came out so early.”
I thought she could have just called me, but Yuki had no cellphone.
“Might waiting for a moment? I’ll get ready immediately.”
“You don’t have to rush.”
“But it’s cold outside. Ah, why don’t you wait inside?”

“No, it’s fine. I’ll wait here.”
“Got it. I’ll get ready quickly then.”
As I said, I hurried back into the house, and got ready to leave. I left the newspapers before my dad, who’s huddled completely in the kotatsu, devoured the breakfast Natsuna prepared, changed clothes, brushed teeth, combed my hair, and told my dad, who had no intention of leaving the kotatsu, I’m going out. Ohh, he weakly replied, and I wasn’t sure if he understood me or not.
I shoved the door aside, and Yuki said happily,
“That’s pretty fast. Shall we go?”
“Yeah. Let’s go.”
The brand new snow surface was left with our footprints alone.
My house’s in a suburb a little away from the town center, and the endless fields there were covered completely white. There were many little light particles glittering upon the pure white snow.
“It’s pretty, isn’t it?”
“Yep. It’s really pretty.”
So after walking a while, someone could be heard screaming.
“Hey, Haru-nii.”
I looked over at the voice, and saw a little silhouette. It’s Shouta, the elementary school kid living nearby, and his blue sweater was covered with snow.
His face was really red, his forehead covered with lots of sweat.
He ran to us, thank goodness, and finally heaved a sigh of relief.
“Haa…haa…it’s you, Haru-nii. I saw you, haa, from far, so I ran. Haa.”
“…What?”
“Help me.”
“Huh?”
I didn’t get what he was saying, and wondered if he was being pursued, so I looked behind him, only to see a few silhouettes running around on the fields. It seemed they were having a snowball fight. Back when I was in elementary school, I remembered playing around with some friends. I really enjoyed myself back then.”
Once I remembered this, I stopped thinking. I should have, but just as I can’t stop immediately after sprinting, I couldn’t stop thinking that quickly.
Yeah, I just so happened to notice it.
Wasn’t there someone who went out to play early in the morning?
“Yuki, let’s go.”
“Don’t run away. You know what I want you to help with?”
“I don’t know. I haven’t seen it.”
“Then have a look.”
“Don’t’ wanna.”
I firmly refused.
I don’t want to be her nanny on such a precious day.

But my determination was immediately changed. Without looking, I could hear a familiar, distinct girl's laugh. Very clearly.
"Nhahahaha."
See, you can't run now, Shouta seemed to be scolding me as he called my name.
"Haru-nii!"
"Stop. Don't say anything."
But Shouta ignored my pleas as he mentioned the cause of that laugh.
"That's the monster (bakemono) from your house, Haru-nii. Do something!"
Ahh, he said it.
Damn it. Alright, I get it. Yes. I really do. So I sighed, and gave on up resisting as I looked over at the source of the voice. There's no doubt.
"Yep. That's our big idiot (bakamono)."
That's the voice of our super duper cute little sister highness.
Well, my little sister, Natsuna Segawa, she's like a typhoon.
She's cute, and pretty popular, but she always gets all kinds of people along to expend energy, which she had lots of. The elementary school kids nearby notably were often her sacrifices, and they're all terrified of her.
This time, it seemed to be a case.
According to Shouta, it was just a snowball fight between the kids, but Natsuna saw them. She, who had the heart of a schoolboy to begin with, couldn't possibly hold in her desire. I vividly imagined her joining in with a bright smile, without a care in the world.
Shouta and the others might have thought it'll be fun to have more people, so they just let her join in…
Problem is, once Natsuna joined, she added a rule that the losing side has to obey what the winning side says. A group of elementary school kids versus someone whose athletic ability is top notch amongst middle schoolers. Now what will happen? It's easy to imagine.
The boys had to fight to the death to avoid the future of becoming Natsuna's lackeys.
Ahh, that's why I didn't want to hear them. I feel really embarrassed as the brother, and depressed…
"I get the situation. I'll think of something. But I'll just beat Natsuna to even things up. I don't care about everything else. Is that okay?"
"Yep. It's okay."
"Then, sorry Yuki. Please wait for a moment."
"Heh? Why?"
I looked over, and saw Yuki stretching and warming up for some reason.
"Are you going to join this snowball fight?"
"Yes. It looks fun. I never did it before."
Shouta, watching her grin like an angel, asked,
"Hey, Haru-nii. I wanted to ask. Who's this big sister? An actress?"
Faced with Shouta's innocent question, Yuki knelt down to his eye level, and smiled at him. He immediately blushed.

“Sorry, this big sister here isn’t an actress. Haru-nii’s girlfriend, actually.”
In response, Shouta’s eyes were glittering more than I ever saw of him.
“You’re amazing Haru-nii. You got such a pretty girlfriend.”
“Well, I guess. Anyway, Shouta. You mind letting this big sister join a team?”
“Of course.”
“Thanks. Please take care of her.”
“Yes. Nice to meet you.”
Yuki said that, and Shouta, who was shaking hands with her, suddenly frowned. He looked down, giving off an apologetic look.
“Ah, sorry. Onee-chan. Looks like you have to join Natsu-nee’s team.”
“Why?”
“Well, you have the smell of the enemy.”
“The enemy’s smell?”
Yuki and I exchanged looks.
What’s going on?
After Yuki joined in, Natsuna’s team had ten players.
After I joined, there’s five in the team.
They outnumber us two to one, but in this snowball fight, anyone’s tagged out whether they fall knee first, fall over, or give up. If they don’t panic too much, they probably won’t lose. That was what I thought. As a guy, if I’m to lose in a battle of strength to a girl, to my girlfriend and little sister for that matter, it’ll be really embarrassing.
Both teams had gathered piles of snow in their camps, and while it’s not tall, it’s possible to curl up and use that snow as a wall. I hid beneath the snow closest to the enemy, quietly waiting for the moment.
Suddenly, my team stopped attacking.
Natsuna loves to make noise, so once things calms down, she’ll definitely charge out alone. My aim’s to go for the unexpected and counter with a sucker punch.
So I waited for a while. As I planned, there’s a madlad charging madly into the enemy camp.
It’s a showy girl with a red muffler, red coat, and red muffler. This energetic girl really loves red.
“Nhahahaha. Charge after me!”
So she yelled as she charged in with tremendous speed. Well, there’s a nice target. I aimed at her wide open mouth, and threw a snowball in with all I got.
“Hbuch!”
A clean hit.
Natsuna made a weird sound, and stopped running. She wiped at the snow sticking to her face, and kept spitting it all out.
“What charge after me? What are you going, Natsuna?”
“Gek. Haru-kun. Wh-why are you here?”
“Now’s not the time for that.”

Natsuna’s taken aback by my sudden entrance, and as expected, she lost her balance. She often acted on instinct, and was bad at dealing with the unexpected. Nevertheless, her natural athletic ability prevented her from falling over immediately. I knew that very well, so naturally,
I created a strategy for this purpose.
I threw a snowball at Natsuna’s face while she was still wobbly. Every shot was aimed high enough for her to evade if she ducked. Natsuna’s able to dodge one by jumping back, but her center of gravity went back as a result.
I threw the next one a little lower, and she dodged that too. Her center of gravity was shifting back.
Basically, it’s a limbo dance.
I repeated the same three throws, and Natsuna finally lost her balance as she landed back with a thud.
“Victory!”
I raised a hand, informing my teammates that I beat Natsuna. She, having collapsed, kept complaining.
“Cheater! You cheater! You’re a guy, Haru-kun. In high school! How can I beat you!”
Seemed like she’s not reflecting on her actions, so I fired another shot at the loser.
“Puk! Uuu. Ahh, snow got into my mouth again!”
“You’re calling me a cheater? You’re in middle school, and you joined an elementary school kid snowball fight?”
Everything’s as planned till this point. But I forgot something. I forgot that among the enemy team, there was a very forthright elderly.
It’s her first time playing a snowball fight.
Thus, she didn’t know of any tactics or counters.
And without thinking of anything, she just did what my sister told her to do.
Yep, she knew nothing.
She didn’t know this was the best way for them to beat us.
“Come on! Everyone. Follow Natsuna-chan and attack!”
“Ngh!”
With a clear shout, all nine remaining members of the enemy team came attacking with snowballs.
If there were similar numbers, our side would be advantaged. We could counter with sucker punches just as I did against Natsuna. However, they have almost twice our numbers. If they just attacked with numbers, there’s no way we could handle them.
“Hbuch!”
Many snowballs flew by, and one of them landed right on my face, causing me to make a similar sound.
Hm? What’s going on? This snow has a sweet smell. This smell is–
“Hey Natsuna. Doesn’t this snow have a sakura smell to it?”
Natsuna, playing dead on the snow, opened her eyes slightly, and glanced towards me, saying,

“I sprayed some sakura perfume on to identify our team’s snowballs.”
That explains things.
That’s why Yuki, who has the sakura smell on her, was assigned to the opposing team.
“Why spray perfume? No, wait, where did that come from? There’s no why those kids will have them. Was it you?”
Ah, damn it. Natsuna gave such a look, and quickly looked aside. She couldn’t whistle, but she was still pouting, blowing as she pretended to whistle and bluff her way out. My little sister’s really hopeless after all.
Speaking of which, mom wanted Natsuna, a middle schooler, to act more like a girl, and pushed many things on her, but it seemed she wasn’t really accepting.
“Don’t waste them just because you aren’t using them.”
“No, I’m not wasting it at all. I said it’s to identify.”
“There’s no need to identify snowballs at all.”
“Feels like it’ll be delicious if there’s a sweet smell.”
“Please, I beg of you. Don’t eat it. You’ll hurt your stomach. Anyway, why spray sakura perfume on snow? These two aren’t of the same season.”
While we’re arguing, the enemy team came attacking, and I was bombarded in concentrated fire. I intended to recover, but they didn’t give me the time.
“Wait…stop! Time, time! Ow ow!”
“Watch this! Everyone, beat that big brother.”
Leading the charge and pelting snowballs at me was a girl who minutes ago said the unbelievable adorable words, this big sister is Haru-nii’s girlfriend.
Yuki’s words kept echoing in my mind. This big sister is Haru-nii’s girlfriend, girlfriend, girlfriend. It’s just my imagination. My delusion.
Finally, i fell. My face lost all senses for a moment after being heavily bombarded. I didn’t know if I was aching or cold, and I couldn’t smell.
“Target killed.”
Yuki looked down on this fallen me, and gave me a guts pose.
“No, I’m not dead.”
“Mfufufu. Yoshi-kun, since you lost, you’ll have to obey what I say.”
“That rule applies for me too?”
“Isn’t it obvious?”
Right, so the loser has to obey the winner. I weakly waved my hand to admit defeat, and Yuki nodded heavily.
“Then everyone. Time to defeat the rest. Let’s charge!”
So I watched Yuki continue to attack with vigor. Next to me, Natsuna said,
“Hey, Haru-kun. Who’s that pretty one? Your acquaintance?”
“…A snow pixie, no? With a sakura smell, right?”
I just muttered, as I was too lazy to explain. That’s weird, snow and sakura are of different seasons, so she muttered, just as a certain person just said.
February 13, Tuesday.
It’s the seventh day Yuki and I became lovers. On this workday, we went to the theme park at the rooftop of the department store.

The mini ferris wheel there was rusted all over due to the wind and the rain, and of the five cars designed with anime characters, three of them were labelled with ‘malfunctioned’. The only ones that could work were a blue cat robot and an electric mouse with red cheeks. There’s a boy seated in the electric mouse, and after moving for about 3 minutes or so, it stopped right in the middle of the theme park.
The thick pile of snow yesterday had basically melted completely, with a few in the shade. The snowmen faces were half melted.
We sat on a plastic bench missing a corner. This was the only place for us to sit and rest. I looked up at the grey sky, muttering.
“So, why are we here?”
“You lost to me in the snowball fight, so you’re going to listen to me for the whole day.”
She answered, as though it was a matter of fact.
I lost in the snowball fight yesterday, so I had to obey Yuki’s wishes. Initially, the rule was that the loser had to obey one thing the winner wanted, but now for some reason, it ended up as me having to obey her for the entire day. Seriously, girls are amazing at getting others to accept their demands. Well, I don’t really hate it.
Yuki said, so my first wish is, a date. There are two places I want to go with you, Yoshi-kun.
This is one of the places.
“No, I get what you’re saying, but that’s not it. Why this rooftop theme park?”
“Because I like them. So I want you to come here, Yoshi-kun.”
“In that case, this is the wrong place. We should be going to a more decent place.”
“No. This is decent enough for a theme park.”
“Are you happy just to be here, Yuki?”
“Yes.”
“You enjoy it?”
“Yes.”
“I guess it’s fine then.”
Yes. Anything’s fine as long as Yuki’s happy.
I patted my knees, stood up, and reached my hand out to Yuki.
“Since we’re here, we might as well ride on the ferris wheel.”
“Ehh, that’ll be embarrassing.”
“It’s fine. There’s nobody else here other than us anyway. Think about it. We made it all the here here, and we’re not riding anything. That’s unbelievable, isn’t it?”
Yuki tried various excuses to get out of this, before she finally held my hand. It’s my victory for ignoring all her excuses. I asked her which one she wanted to ride on, and since she liked cats, we took the cat robot.
“100 yen going in.”
“You’re not riding, Yoshi-kun?”

“It’s for one. I’ll go in later.”
“Later?”
While Yuki tilted her head cutely, I inserted a coin, excusing myself.
“I’m already 18. It’s really embarrassing to ride on this.”
“Ah, is that so?”
After hearing my excuse, Yuki scowled in anger, but I managed to escape the cat robot before her fist reached my face. It began to move slowly, along with the strange music.
The kid riding on the electric mouse pointed at Yuki,
“Mama. Can I ride on that now?”
“Wait for the big sister to be done.”
Ahh. It’s really embarrassing. I looked towards Yuki, and found her face reddened to the bottom of her neck, her hands covering her face. She’s really cute when she acts like this. I quietly decided that I would let her beat me once or twice.
Finally, Yuki had me treat her to juice from the vending machine, instead of hitting me.
I slipped the coins in, and green lights appeared on the buttons.
“Choose one you like.”
She gave a grim look, wondering, before choosing the cocoa drink, and I too bought the same. Both of us couldn’t drink black coffee. While we’re not kids, we’re not old enough to be called adults. At this point, we’re on the boundary between these two age groups.
We leaned our backs on the parapet, drinking the cocoa in unison.
Both of us were close to each other, and I just needed to move a little to touch Yuki. I could truly feel her presence, her warmth, and her smell. Her hands were on the can, trying to warm them, as she drank slowly.
“Hey, Yoshi-kun. Thanks.”
Suddenly, Yuki said that.
“Why thank me? I didn’t do anything.”
“That’s not true. You bought cocoa, brought me here, and the other yous created many, many memories with me. Hey, I guess these should be enough reason to thank you, right?”
Yuki closed her eyes, as though recalling something.
“I really like seeing you smile, seeing your angry face, your crying face, your bashful face, your troubled face, and your anxious face. I guess, before I die, I’ll definitely remember every day since the moment I met you. One day, it’ll be as you say, Yoshi-kun. Even if I keep struggling, and even if I reach the place, only to not find what I wanted, there should be something more valuable there…”
Saying that, Yuki paused. She probably wanted me to ask what she wanted to say, since she waited for me to ask. So I did.
“What did you find there?”
“I found you there. You’re there, Yoshi-kun, in the heart I thought was empty.”

Nn, so she muttered, and opened her eyes slowly with satisfaction.
“Every day I lived, there’s you around, Yoshi-kun.”
Why’s that?
It’s not some tear inducing words, yet I felt my nose a little itchy. I looked up at the sky to hide this sight, staring at the reddened clouds there. The bright, stinging red shone deep into my eyes.
Suddenly, Yuki reached her hand out, patting my head. She’s not as tall as me, so she tiptoed. The place she touched was very warm, very comfortable.
“…What are you doing?”
“Hm? I’m comforting you, Yoshi-kun. You look like you’re going to cry.”
“I’m not a kid.”
“It’s not a bad thing. I think just now was pretty embarrassing, so you should experience that, Yoshi-kun.”
Now we’re even, so she said as she stroked her fingers on my hair.
Ahh, it’s itchy. What’s going on? Why do I feel this happy just because of this little thing? I could feel the soft touch of her hand, and ended up smiling.
Very good, so Yuki said after seeing me smile.
“You’re finally smiling.”
The sun set, and the place we were headed after the theme park was my high school.
It’s the other place Yuki wanted to visit.
It’s past 7pm, and in the darkness, the school lights were already off. The only places with orange lights on were the office, self study rooms, two second year classrooms and a first year classroom. Those taking the entrance exams were probably in the self study rooms. The third year classrooms were completely dark, just nice for us.
I held Yuki’s hand as I snuck into the darkness of the night, slipping into school.
Our footsteps echoed in the dark stairs. On the way, we spotted a teacher, so I hid Yuki behind me, telling the teacher that I forgot something. Oh, so the response as the teacher let us off. I guess the teacher couldn’t see Yuki’s face clearly due to the darkness.
Once the teacher disappeared, we heaved a sigh of relief, before we went over to my classroom.
Luckily, the classroom isn’t locked. I slid the door aside, and with a familiar creak, the classroom and the corridor were linked.
The sacred moonlight shining through the window dyed half the classroom silver.
It was a very familiar classroom to me, but for Yuki, it was a new sight as she looked around with excitement. Wow. She squealed with excitement, touching the desks as though they were gemstones. Ahh, there’s graffiti, so she said as she wandered around the classroom, before she suddenly looked towards me.
“Hey, which is your table, Yoshi-kun?”

“Eh? Ahh, third column from the right, fourth seat.”
I was mesmerized as I watched her, and was a little slow to react. However, I somehow answered her. 1, 2, 3, 4, Yuki counted as she went over to my seat.
“This one?”
“Yes.”
I thought she would sit on the chair next to mine, but for some reason, she took the one next to it, and then,
“Alright, Yoshi-kun, this is the second wish. You’re going to sit here.”
She patted my chair. What else was I supposed to do? Of course, I was to sit on where she indicated.
I should be familiar with the sight of this classroom from my own seat, but with Yuki sitting next to me, everything seemed brand new. The old desks, the chalk marked blackboard, the papers with the boring class targets were all filled with light.
“It feels like it’ll be great to have you as a classmate around, Yuki.”
“You get that?”
I blurted out my thoughts, and for some reason, Yuki said, looking really gleeful.
“I wonder who was the one three years ago who said he didn’t know what’s good about this place?”
“There’s such an idiot?”
“Yep. There was. Ah, even if we’re in the same school, we might not be in the same class. After all, I’m older by a year. Yes, yes. Call me Shiina-senpai.”
Yuki’s voice was very close. For every move she made, the desk shook. Something within me kept shaking away.
“…Shiina-senpai.”
Once I said that, Yuki grinned.
Hey, repeat that again. Don’t wanna. Please. Really got no choice here, huh, Shiina-senpai? Good, now one more time. Shiina-senpai. Once more, a little more intimate. Call me Yuki-senpai? Not bad no bad. One more time.
Seriously, don’t Yuki. You’re like a pervert here. Your eyes are glowing.
You’re calling me a pervert? How rude.
Whatever I said, Yuki would laugh, get angry, look disappointed, or pout.
Within this classroom, Yuki and my voices were the only things echoing.
While we chatted, so why? I asked. I really wanted to ask this right from the beginning.
“Why did you want to come to my classroom.”
“…Well, I told Akane-chan.”
Once that name was suddenly mentioned, I was taken aback.
“You’re just ordinary classmates, right?. Then it doesn’t matter what my relationship with Yoshi-kun is now. After that, I was unhappy about it. Even though she’s just a classmate, I was envious of her. I don’t know how you’re like at school, Yoshi-kun. This is the last time.”

She stood up from the chair, and pulled her distance from me. The breeze lifted her long skirt slightly.
She was in the darkness, standing there like a divide between the light and the darkness.
“Last time.”
I repeated this words, and immediately felt the pain all over my body.
“You’re going to graduate, Yoshi-kun. I wanted to come to your classroom before then. This is the perfect chance.”
“Ahh, I see.”
Guess she wasn’t planning anything else.
Yuki said that we met hundreds of times. Surely in the future, we’ll meet countless times again. Hey, isn’t that right?
“Hey, Yuki-senpai.”
I called her out to appeal to her, and she narrowed her eyes, scratched her cheeks, and finally shook her head.
“That sounds good, but I prefer the usual. Call me Yuki.”
“Yuki.”
Her name’s like a preset as it came naturally from my mouth.
“I like you. I really, really do.”
“I know. You told me that many times already. I like you too, Yoshi-kun.”
Suddenly, a sudden impulse struck me. I couldn’t resist it. I hurried towards Yuki, and embraced her petite body slightly. The sweet sakura scent came.
No, that’s not it.
For me, this is already Yuki’s smell.
“Wawa, why out of a sudden?”
“It’s your fault, Yuki.”
“My fault?”
“Yeah, your fault, Yuki. Everything’s all your fault.”
“I see. Then there’s no choice there. It’s my fault you like to fawn around with me.”
It’s all Yuki’s fault for making me like this.
I brought my face to Yuki’s chuckling face.
It seemed Yuki knew what I wanted to do as she closed her eyes tight, Her cheeks turned red as she finally got ready to accept me. She’s really cute; I really didn’t know how many times I thought that.
In this corner of the world even the moonlight couldn’t reach, we made a kiss nobody else knew of.
As we touched, her lips were really cold, trembling. It’s clumsy, just a tender kiss between lips, but we were so much sure of each other’s feelings, each other’s warmth, compared to the countless confessions and hand holdings.
Humanity as a species had used this act to clearly identify each other’s existence.

After what seemed like an eternal five seconds, Yuki buried her face into my chest, seemingly to cover her own face as she sulked away. But I knew she was just hiding her embarrassment.
“This is my first kiss.”
She was really cute in that state, so I smiled. See, it’s all Yuki’s fault, right? No boy can resist it when there’s such a cute girl before him.
“No doubt that’s my first kiss too.”
“Hey.”
Yuki lifted her head. Her face, and even till her ears, were completely red.
“My third request. One more time?”
So our lips kept touching over and over again.
Yuki and I split up at the front gates, and while I was walking home, the smartphone in my pocket rang.
‘Public number’ were the words written there. Normally, I would never pick up this call, but I did. For a reason.
I had a feeling I knew who called.
“Hey Yuki?”
Before she said her name, I called her. You’re right, so she answered.
The voice from the phone was very soft, yet it seemed closer than usual, and I could even hear her breathing. It was something just right beside me, within my hand.
I went to the street light, which was still buzzing away, and leaned my back on the pillar, looking up at the sky. Where is she right now? So I thought as I pricked my ears to listen.
“I want to talk a little more, so I called. Mind chatting for a little longer?”
“Of course. But, what’s the matter? Something happened?”
“…Why you ask?”
Well, the reason’s simple, but I couldn’t say it out. I gulped, and sorted myself out. Because. This time, I managed to say it. So I had to continue,
“Your voice is shaking.”
Even this dull witted me knew that her voice was because she was feeling cold.
“My voice is shaking?”
“Yeah.”
“I see. So it’s shaking. I guess so. Hey, Yoshi-kun, I’ll ask something. You don’t want to forget about me, right? You want to keep remembering me, right?”
“Of course.”
“No matter the price?”
“Yes.”
I answered without giving much thought.
I didn’t realize that this was the last fork in the road.
“Yes, you’re right. I knew you’ll say that, Yoshi-kun. In that case, I have one request. A final one. Are you willing to hear?”
“Of course. I spent an entire day fulfilling your wishes after all.”

“Thank you. Then…”
Please bring me to the theme park. Please bring me to school. With the same warmth as when she said these wishes, Yuki said,
“Please be hurt for my sake.”
“Eh?”
“Please like me, love me, hate me. Please regret over me, suffer for me. Please use all your emotions to bind our hearts together. Please don’t forget about me.”
This was Yuki’s last wish.
I immediately looked at the watch. There’s still an hour until 10.54pm. Sweat was slowly seeping from my back. The weather’s cold, but for some reason, I was feeling hot, unbearable. I didn’t want to hear anything. I wanted to cover my ears, to grab the happiness that was in my hand moments ago, go back home, and sleep.
Ahh, what if it’s as I wish? But Yuki immediately turned that into an illusion. She gently muttered those words.
–I’m going to die now.
Her voice seemed to be filled with joy, and tears.
“Why?”
“I took lots and lots of time from you, Yoshi-kun. I did take away the time that should be in your heart, your memories, and everything. Till this point, I did lots of cruel things.”
“That’s not true.”
“No. That’s true, but you told me that you like this me. I’m happy. Really happy. Because of that, I really pray that I’ll be able to remain in your heart. Even if it hurts you, Yoshi-kun, even if I’m hated by you, I’ll stick to my wish. If there’s one resting place on this world for me, that’ll be your heart.”
It’s not the answer to my question. Yuki herself probably understood this, and deliberately said these words.
But even so, I had to realize there was no pretense in her words.
Again I ran towards the road I took.
I passed the bridge, and dashed into the park. The toilet lights dimly lit the road. I retracted my steps at the fork, hesitating on where I should go. Ahh, damn it. I’m wasting precious time just being frustrated. In the end, I went to the station.
“Hey, Yuki, wait a moment. I’m on my way to you, right now. We’ll talk then, alright.”
“Didn’t you say that you’ll listen to my wishes no matter what? Are you going to break this promise again?”
“Again?”
“Yes, again. You’re always like this, Yoshi-kun, always making promises you couldn’t fulfill.”
“What promises did I break?”
“You said you’ll remember.”
“Eh?”

“You said that you’ll remember me when you smell the sakura.”
“…”
“You said you’ll never forgot.”
“…”
“You said you’ll invite me out to the movies.”
“…”
So Yuki kept listing the promises made nowhere on this world, but in her heart. I couldn’t even apologize to her. No, I had no right to apologize.
“Isn’t it all a lie!?”
So, Yuki’s voice was feeble, at least fulfill this promise!
“It has to be you. I can no longer say that anyone can do. I don’t want to do this if it’s not you. I don’t care what form it is, I want to remain in your heart all the time. I don’t want to be forgotten by you. I don’t want to take anything away from you. Little is fine, anything is fine, I want to remain in your heart. This is the only way to do those…”
I arrived at the station.
I saw no signs of Yuki.
I looked around, nearby crashing into an uncle riding on a bicycle, stumbling around. Watch where you’re going! Don’t call and run! The uncle glared and yelled at me angrily. I lowered my head slightly in apology, and ran to the town hall. I could hear what the uncle was saying, but I didn’t look back.
I kept running, all to keep looking for Yuki.
Ever since the day I lost everything, I walked on alone till this point.
The directionless emptiness, rage and hatred unwittingly became the reason I lived. Without any of these things, I probably wouldn’t be able to stand up again.
Until the day he called out to me.
It’s not a metaphor, and it’s not a joke. The world changed ever since that day.
He helped change me.
I got a dream.
That became my reason to live.
He fulfilled the many things the younger me wanted to do.
Before I knew it, the emptiness, rage, and even hatred vanished, and something warmer filled me instead. I can no longer look away from these feelings.
Ah, that’s right.
I’ve fallen in love for the first time.
What shall I call these cute, wonderful days? I wondered, and shook my head. This isn’t something worth being named.
We wanted to be together, forever.
To head to the ends of the world together.
But it’s impossible, it can’t be fulfilled.
The end of these days, our ending will be filled with overbearing sadness.

We kept encountering each other, for the sake of this one farewell.
❀
The road before the town hall was pretty empty, nobody on the road, and it's quiet everywhere. The round street light was making a round prism. Looking down, I saw three shadows at my feet, one facing right, one facing left, and one facing forward. There's probably light sources from each direction; right, left and straight.
Which side should I take to get to Yuki?
I didn't know.
And without knowing, I went forward. I didn't know why exactly, but I was quietly confident of something.
Yuki's only in front of me.
So, yes, I ran forward.
The shortest distance, the fastest speed possible, towards Yuki.
The orange light shone upon me, hiding with the clear glass. The wind's howling outside, and a poster was fluttering with the wind, probably because a nail holding it down on the old billboard had fallen off.
I tried reaching my fingers forward, but I was blocked by the glass, unable to touch it.
I moved my fingers away, and there were marks of my touch on it.
Right now, I still exist on this world. Yes, I still exist in his heart.
Surely, to Yoshi-kun, I'm a very cute girl.
If he finds me cute, that's fine. Ahh, but he did say I'm very stubborn, that I'm a meanie to him, that I fawned around with him, so it might not be cute. I showed him my dirty side. He said I was really a glutton.
And in the very end, everything will be erased away. Sadness, agony and despair will definitely take my form, replacing my place in Yoshi-kun's heart.
If I can do this much, I'm finally in his heart.
This is the only way to remain in his heart.
Originally, the reason why all traces of me vanished was because I wanted to go to the future. The world had to keep erasing my existence because I lived. In that case, if I die, there's no reason for me to be erased. Of course, the past that was erased won't return, but the present that's not taken away will remain.
I've been waiting for this moment.
Being lovers for just one week.
Our thoughts truly intertwined.
During that golden period of time, I probably had engraved myself firmly, strongly within him.
More importantly, Yoshi-kun yearned for me. He reached his arms out, crawling out to me. He kept struggling for me.
But even after all that, to not obtain what one wants will surely became a large wound that can never disappear. He'll cry, endure pain, and remember me. Thus, I can continue to remain in his heart.

I could hear Yoshi-kun’s tired panting from the other end of the phone.
I could hear him sprinting.
Everything’s going according to plan.
Sorry. I wanted to say this selfish word, but I swallowed it back.
Those words were too sharp, such that I, who forced myself to swallow, nearby burst into tears.
❀
My arms hurt.
My feet hurt.
My heart hurt.
Beads of sweat slid towards my cheeks. My body’s feeling hot, and heavy.
But I couldn’t stop. I had to keep running.
I turned right down the long highway, down the slope. It’s a really deep slope. I quietly warned myself to be careful, but my anxious feelings wouldn’t allow myself to slow down. After taking the first step, the second step strode forth without control. Uh oh. My heart’s pounding wildly. Even so, I couldn’t stop. I was like a fly in the sky, moving forward. Whenever my feet landed, there would be a shock dozens of time greater.
I kept running, and naturally, I reached my limit. The right leg gave up on supporting the body weight as it bent over. I could clearly hear that stupid sound.
“Ahh.”
Then, I tumbled over.
Fuu. I let out a long sigh.
Time was the only thing that passed.
Several times already, I wanted to hang up, but I couldn’t. What’s wrong with me? The time limit’s ticking closer. Come on, hang up. There’s no way he’ll make it here. It’s a waste of time to keep hesitating. If I don’t die now, I won’t remain in his heart.
But my body couldn’t move.
Yuki.
My name he called countless times surrounded my arm.
Yuki.
I closed my eyes, saw his gentle smile, and my legs felt heavier.
I kept thinking and thinking.
I kept brooding and brooding.
And after that, I should have chosen my wish. Even though I knew it’ll hurt him. Even though I knew it’ll make him sad.
But even so–
Suddenly, I heard something.
It was from the other end of the phone, from him.
It was the sound of someone crashing, someone groaning. No, I couldn’t even hear that sound.
For me, the one memory I didn’t want to remember awoke in me.
Forgetting everything, I called out his name.

“Yoshi-kun, are you alright? What happened? Hey! Yoshi-kun. Answer me!”
❀
At that moment, I grabbed the smartphone in my hand with all my might, curled up, and brought the cellphone to the my core.
Because of that, I just fell onto the ground without using any ukemi technique. There was a sharp pain striking my left shoulder, causing me to groan. After rolling for a while, I stopped.
I had difficulty breathing, and did my best to speak up, inhaling the cold winter air into my lungs with all my might. No matter how much oxygen I took in, I was having difficulty breathing.
I had difficulty running, and my body’s in pain all over. This is terrible. I can’t even stand up. Physically, and mentally.
I had a strange doubt remaining in my me.
Why am I doing this?
Someone within me said.
Isn’t this enough?
Yuki’s definitely suffering. She’s always been alone, working hard till this point. At the very least, let her be selfish to the very end.
I kept thinking of words telling me to give up.
And even if I did find her, what did I intend to do? Was I prepared to change Yuki’s determination?
I had all sorts of excuses coming up in my mind.
I’m already working hard. I had lots of unbearable experiences, and got myself dirty all over. This should be enough, right?
Once this ends, nobody will grumble. But–
There’s one thing. Yuki’s voice was coming from the smartphone in my hands. Yoshi-kun, are you alright? What happened? Hey! Yoshi-kun. Answer me!
I barely managed to move my body, and ended up lying on the ground, slowly opening my eyes. The dazzling light shone into my vision. The moon was shining upon me.
Sirius was shining.
I could see Aldebaran.
My mind’s completely awake. The voice in my mind faded, and I could only hear a girl’s voice.
Ahh, what? You don’t have to be so worried about me. But I’m really happy about this.
I called out the name.
Just as she called out my name, so I called hers.
“Yuki.”
“What?”
“You’re cruel.”
With the same trembling voice, Yuki snorted. She didn’t seem to be enjoying this.

“I said this before, you know? It happened a long time ago, and though it disappeared, I did say that I’m doing something cruel to you. I did say that you can’t not believe what I say.”
“So what did the me back then answer?”
“…Can we meet tomorrow. You said to me.”
“I’m an idiot.”
“Yes. An idiot. That’s why you’re targeted by this bad girl.”
“Yep. I’m really an idiot.”
There should be more things I wanted to say.
There should be more things I had to say.
“I should have said I like you.”
“…How weird are you?”
That should be fine.
You like weirdos, don’t you?
Then I’ll be a weirdo.
“Yes, I’m a weirdo who likes you. I might have lied a lot, broken a lot of promises, but this is the one thing that’s true.”
After some silence, yes, Yuki muttered. She knew.
“So I’m going over to you now. I don’t know what you’re thinking, what you thought, what you’re frustrated about, what you’re worried about, what made you decide that. In the future, I want to meet you many times, to love, to live together.”
The past would refer to four years ago. Back then, there was a boy who couldn’t honestly say what he wanted. For most of the things, he chose to endure, to give up. That boy no longer exists anywhere in this world.
Because I can’t stand for this. I can’t accept that Yuki’s crying.
If I can ensure that the girl dearest to me won’t cry, I’ll do everything, even if I’ll have to give my all.
I finally got it.
Something I really wanted from the bottom of my heart.
Something I was afraid of losing.
Something I was willing to give my all for.
Because I met Yuki.
Because, I met Yuki?
Suddenly, various things linked in my mind. Lines were formed, like the constellations appearing in my eyes. I caught sight of Orion’s light.
Some time back, I mapped the stars with the picture books, connecting the stars into constellations. Was I really alone back then? Definitely not.
Found it!
I exclaimed. Yes. I finally found the link.
“Yuk. You said everything doesn’t exist, but that’s not true. You said you took everything from me, but that’s not it.”
Finally, I can confidently say that I believe you.
“You see, I’m here.”
“What are you trying to say?”

Yuki's voice on the phone was filled with doubt, but I ignored her, and continued.
"A week ago, we met at that empty land. It's not a coincidence. Shiro's sleeping there. I stopped because Shiro was buried there. If you didn't ask me four years ago, there's no way we would have met there."
On the other end of the phone, Yuki gasped.
"Because of your existence, Shiro didn't live her last moments alone. Because of your determination, she's sleeping in the place filled with warmth. And because you kept mustering your courage to talk to me, I'm here. It's all connected. All this time, you've been in my heart."
I went to various places alone, and did lots of things. I enjoyed these things in my memories, all because Yuki was next to me. It's fine, Yuki. It's fine. You didn't take anything away from me. Not only that, you gave me lots of things.
A girl did her best to change me to my current self.
Yuki muttered.
"I'm already in your heart, Yoshi-kun?"
"Yeah, that's right. You're right here, within me."
"…I see. I guess that's enough. Then my life has already–"
"No, it's nothing. More importantly, hey, Yoshi-kun. Can I change the last wish a little? If I'm really in your heart, prove it to me. Get to me. Please. Call my name."
I closed my eyes tightly. I opened them. The vision's shockingly brighter.
"I'll go over right now. Immediately."
"…I'll be waiting."
I exerted strength into my right hand. I felt heat. It might be because I was using the phone for a long time that the phone was a little hot. However, it's not burning. It's as warm as Yuki's palm.
I grasped it.
I had to keep grabbing it, so that I wouldn't lose it, that I wouldn't let it slip. Because–
We call that heat 'love'.
I put my hands on the floor, and stood up.
Tsuu, haa. I was aching inside. I nearly cried. But I took the first step. I took the second step. I gritted my teeth, and sped up.
I ran by my middle school. How many times did I chase after a certain person's shadow here? –she's not here.
I ran by the convenience store, which I passed on my way home after club activities ended. How many times did I eat ice cream alone here? –she's not here.
I passed the bookshop I often visited. How many times did I purchase the new novel publications? –she's not here.
Before I knew it, the library's right behind me. How many times did I struggle with the maths assignments alone? –she's not here.

I passed the game center, the karaoke, the bowling alley, the batting center, the cinema. She's not in any of them.
This town's filled with my lonely memories.
None of them had Yuki's presence.
I was alone.
But at this point, I can see a certain person over there. After she was erased, something was always used to cover up a person's existence, yet I did hear laughter. It sounded really happy, belonging to the girl I like.
I turned right at the T junction, and ran straight ahead. How many times did I run down this road alone? But back then, surely there was Yuki before me.
Haa, haa. I kept driving my legs. I looked forward. It's the path towards Yuki, from the vanished time.
So I believe.
I looked towards the public hall far away.
I saw the little billboard.
I saw someone inside a public phone booth that was glowing dimly in the darkness. Even though I could only see a silhouette, that person's making a call. I found her. I heaved a sigh of relief.
I reached my hand out.
Just a little. Just a little more.
But even so, why–
The clock hands wouldn't stop.
There was still some distance between us. I couldn't see Yuki's face clearly. I couldn't hear Yuki's voice. My voice couldn't reach her. I was here, but Yuki never noticed me.
Emotions immediately exploded.
Anxiety, sadness, rage. And most of all, fear.
I was gasping, short of breath. I couldn't make a sound. The word end appeared in my mind. No, no, no. I don't want this end, no!
Yuki, who's been quiet the entire time, suddenly said.
The voice came from the phone.
"Thank you very much for everything. I'm really happy. I really enjoyed myself. Actually, ever since I met you, I had been really happy. It's great to live till now."
Why are you saying it like it's the end? This isn't the end! It's not over. You're still here, Yuki. You're still here.
"Actually, no matter what happens, I probably won't be able to get what I want. I used to be a hollow shell, yet right now, my heart's filled with so many memories. We went to the seaside that winter, but it wasn't cold because both of us were together. We went to the cinema together, but I enjoyed myself, because we watched the movie together. When we had my first snowball fight together, I was really pumped up. I tried lots of delicious things, no doubt about that. I'm not defending myself here, but I'm not really a glutton, you know? It's too delicious when you're with me, Yoshi-kun, so I overate. Eating's living after all."

That’s not enough, right? Let’s create lots of memories together. Let’s go to various places. Let’s go eat lots and lots of delicious things. So,
“We held hands many times. Your hand has always been warm, and I like it. My heart was pounding so wildly, I thought it’ll explode, but it felt nice.”
Yuki’s hand was really cold. But soon it got warm. Because of that, I was happy.
“Actually, this is the first time in my life that I like someone. I told him that I like him, and he told me that he likes me. I said lots of stubborn things to him, and fooled around with me. Wooing a boy feels pretty good. Hm. Yeah, it really feels good.”
If I could have said, it was my first love, that would be great, but it’s probably not. I guess I fell in love with the same certain person 214 times. The same person. You.
“The first kiss was actually after school, in the classroom. It’s really dramatic. Speaking of which, in the manga, they say a first kiss tastes like lemon, but I think that’s not true. It’s embarrassing, a happy thing to kiss, there’s no way to taste anything. Or do you know what it is, Yoshi-kun? How does the first kiss taste like?”
There’s no way I could tell.
Hey, Yoshi-kun.
Yuki called out to me.
“…Looking at this, our romance’s pretty normal. It’s like an ordinary boy going out with an ordinary girl, just an ordinary story. But. No. Actually, it’s because of this that I feel something worth giving my all for. Because of you, I’m able to say these words now. Eheheh. It feels a little embarrassing. But I’ll say it now. Listen. This is my life. The dazzling days I spent with you, Yoshi-kun.”
Surely, Yuki kept living for the sake of these words.
–This is the Happiest Love Story on this World.
Her voice was no longer shaking.
Finally, my dearest Yuki said the words of farewell, as proudly as she normally was.
And at the same time, the chest ripping pain became heat as it slid down my cheeks.
“Why are you saying this? I still want to be with you. So, I beg of you. Live on! Keep living!”
Did my words reach her?
Did she hear me?
Are we still connected?
Just a little longer. Yuki can change her mind again if there’s some opportunity, some time. But that some wasn’t enough.
“I’ll wait for you. I’ll always be waiting for you. For you to call my name!”
My knees ached. I endured, making sure that I didn’t let out a groan. My knees were shaking, and I couldn’t exert strength. It’s like my strength was

flowing out from a wound, along with blood. I was losing balance. I expended everything just gritting my teeth, forcing myself not to fall.
Why!? Why now!? Get moving! I don't care that I won't move ever again! Get me over to Yuki! Please! The girl I like is over there!
"…I like you. I really do! I like you more than anyone, anything!"
I yelled.
I called out the name dearest to me in this world, towards that little light.
I prayed that my voice could reach her.
"Yu,–"
This was all I could do.
And at that moment, the world silently changed.
In that moment, when eternity seemed compressed, I dreamt that I saw a girl.
The Yuki who said she likes me.
The Yuki who sought a reason to hold hands.
Who fought in a snowball fight.
Who went to the theme park.
Who kissed in the classroom no one else was in.
Who said that she'll be waiting. But I–
Our memories together, past events, Yuki's voice, actions, expressions, each of them fell one by one, and upon contact, didn't pile up. Instead, they slipped from my hands. Ahh, wait. Wait a second.
Soon, the final words melted, and fell.
"Bye bye, Yoshi-kun. You're always the only one on my mind. Yuki Shiina is the one who loves Haruyoshi Segawa most on this world."
Yuki's smile appeared in my mind. This was the last fragment belonging to Yuki within me.
My foot speed slowed. Not long after, I stopped in my tracks.
There was just one syllable left in my sentence.
But I no longer knew what it was.
I never knew what the world took from me.
❀
I took a deep breath to recover.
Where was I going?
Suddenly, I felt a sudden pain in my knees. It was the grazed wound after I fell. I took a hard tumble, and ended up injured all over. I was scared of pain, and shed tears, but I kept running to a certain place. Even so, I ended up stopping.
Seriously, what was I doing?
"Ahh damn it! It hurts! It really does! I want to cry!"
I was crying, but I ended up acting tough, and the voice ultimately never reached anyone as it slowly disappeared.
A half moon was high up in the sky, and the moonlight shone into these eyes of mine, while I knew nothing.
The phone line was quietly cut off.

Like the two hundred and so times before, the world cruelly cut off my contact with him.
I couldn’t stand up at all, and remained knelt in the phone booth. There’s no need to endure anymore. I shriveled, hugging myself. My breathing alone sounded really noisy. Once this too faded away, I started noticing the echo deep within my ears. It’s a hallucination. I knew. But…
The voice was teeny weeny, yet it was like the stars dazzling in the night sky, sparkling in the middle of my heart.
Wait for me. Keep living.
These words were still calling for me.
They should have vanished.
They shouldn’t have existed at all.
So why were they still shaking my heart?
He’s a meanie. He’s an annoying one. Ah, but even so,
He’s the weirdest person on this world.
Before I knew it, I was smiling. I was able to smile.
For my hands were full with what I could hold.
The place I finally reached, the place Yoshi-kun led me to, the ending that was more wonderful than I expected. In the future, he’ll surely be smiling. He’ll be smiling along with the long time he spent with me. That’s why I’m happy enough.
I wiped my tears hard, and stood up.
I put my hands in my pocket, and my fingers touched something hard. What is it? I took it out, and found chocolate. It’s a really common type sold everywhere. It doesn’t cost 100 yen, and it was given by the boy whose name I knew not of back then. That was our beginning.
“If possible, can you gift me chocolate?”
His voice sounded hopeful.
“Of course. Well, because it’ll be from my girlfriend.”
His expression was bashful.
Well, at the very least, I should give this to him. We promised. Didn’t the lying boy finally fulfill this promise for me?
He called out my name. Half of it.
It’s just one syllable, but I did hear it. It’s not a voice through the phone line, but his honest voice. Let’s go fulfill that promise. Dad, mom, Umi. Mind waiting a little longer…just a little?
I left the phone booth, and in a corner of my eyes, I caught sight of a silhouette whose name I knew not of, but I didn’t check, and left in the opposite direction of that person.
In the distant horizon, the light of the half moon shone into my eyes.
It’s a pretty moon.
So I earnestly thought.
It’s been a long while since I was so madly in love with this world.
Back when I loved this world, so much that I wished to live on.

Epilogue

ユキの匂い

Epilogue: Yuki’s Smell

It’s morning, I woke up as usual, had breakfast, and washed my face, only to realize something. No, I already knew about it, just that my heart just caught up to reality.
The sleeves of the school uniform I wore for three years no longer fit me.
At the end of February, I took the second exam. Not even a week passed, and it was the graduation ceremony. Yesterday’s the results announcements.
For the past few days, I was scrambling around.
I intended to check my number on the computer, to see if I made it, but dad had a peek at it earlier. Congratulations, so he said over the phone, his voice shaking. Thank you. That was the brief conversation we had. Once I hung up, elation rose up my heart.
I immediately collapsed onto the bed, my hand reaching for the orange light. My palm felt some warmth, so I clenched it. I felt I was grabbing something. Then, I opened the hand. There’s nothing on it, but…
I did grab something.
I changed into shirt and jeans, and put on a cardigan, before heading down the road to school I walked for three years. During mid-February, there’s lots of snow piled up, but at this point, it’s already Spring.
With the warm sun shining down, the snow vanished without a trace.
I looked at the sky blue like water as I kept walking, and spotted a familiar face.
It’s been a week since we met, right? Before then, we would meet every single day. It’s weird. This human relationship thing can easily break like this if neither of us maintain it. Those things I don’t ever want to give up on, I’ll have to keep reaching my hands out for them.
“Yaa, morning Akane.”
I lifted my hand to greet her, and she waved back,
“Morning. What are you doing early in the morning.”
“Go report to school that I passed. The results were out yesterday.”
“You’re too serious. I settled it with a call.”
“Well, a lot of teachers helped me out, so I want to tell them the good news directly. If you got time, do you want to come along with me, Akane?”
“Sure. This Akane-san’s kind enough to come along with you.”
“Thanks.”
There were few pedestrians on this working day, and there was a little silhouette before us, nobody else to be seen. As we approached it, it seemed the silhouette was approaching us, being a little bigger. Despite that, we’re so far away that we can’t determine each other’s gender. Will that silhouette approach us, pass us by, or turn away on the way?
Without thinking too much, I started wondering about these useless things, and that’s why I ended up saying the rest,

“Akane. I want to ask you something, so promise me, don’t get angry, okay?”
“Nope. Even if I say no, you’re going to ask. Nice personality you have there, Haru.”
“Thanks for that.”
“No, I’m not praising you. I’m being sarcastic.”
“Of course I know that.”
I said with a proud look, and Akane sighed, seemingly having given up on something.
“So, what’s it that you want to ask?”
“That day, February 14th. Did you give me chocolate or something…?”
For every word I said, Akane’s words clearly looked increasing annoyed. Just looking at her mood, I knew the answer. Ahh, she’s really angry. No, she’s just sulking.
“That never happened, right?”
Once I said that, Akane pinched my face. Anyway, it hurts.
“You’re asking the girl you dumped?”
“That’s why I asked you not to get angry.”
“In your dreams.”
Akane pinched my other cheek with her other hand. Yay, yay, she fooled around as she tugged on my cheeks to both sides. Seriously, what’s this? It really hurts.
Puhahaha, she couldn’t help but laugh. You’re really ugly, she said.
“Haa, such a good laugh here. Since I’m feeling merciful, I’ll get this clear. So, what did you say? Ah, I remember. You received chocolate from someone on the 14th, didn’t you, Haru?”
“Yesu.”
My cheeks are pulled so much, I couldn’t open my mouth, so I couldn’t answer properly. It seemed Akane too knew as she finally let go. Once I had such a thought of relief, I got slapped by her with both hands. This hurts five times more than before.
“You don’t know where you got it from, so that means, you didn’t receive it from that person’s hands, right?”
I rubbed my cheeks, nodding.
“It was in my house mailbox. I found it while picking up the morning newspapers. There’s no sender name on it, but I guess it’s probably from someone who knows that I collect the newspapers every morning.”
It’s a common chocolate. Yes, it’s sold at the nearby convenience store, and doesn’t have packaging. I often ate such chocolate in middle school, but the taste seemed different from what I ate back then. It feels really sweet.
“I didn’t know you have the habit of picking up the newspapers, Haru.”
“Fumu. If it’s not you, Akane, then who?”
“You ask who, but it doesn’t matter now, right? That person probably mustered all her courage to deliver that chocolate to you. Right now, the chocolate’s in your hands. Yep, that’s right. Her love might have been

repaid. Such love does exist anyway. Look, personally, I don't think unrequited love is necessarily meaningly.
Once I was told of that, I didn't pursue the matter further.
I couldn't respond to Akane's courage and adoration. But it's to be expected. Besides,
"While you're still angry, I want to ask something, alright?"
"…Sure."
"How does it feel to like something?"
Akane stared at me.
"I haven't fallen in love anyway."
Over the past 18 years, I never had a romance with anyone.
For all my life, I never knew of the fearless passion to think of the world as the enemy, and neight did I know of any scorching pain in my heart.
Relax, you know love very well. So Akane denied what I said.
"Back then, Haru, when you rejected my confession, you had fallen for someone. No. Maybe that's not love, but back then, your heart's definitely feeling something as blazing as love. Back then, your heart surely contained an existence more important than me. That's why you rejected my confession, Haru."
Akane, walking backwards the whole time, turned around, and continued with her back facing me.
"Girls are pretty strong, and yet weak, stupid creatures, I guess. Men probably won't understand this, I guess. It's like putting a gem in a drawer, and taking it out to look and satisfy her feelings. If there's a gem or something similar in the heart, then no matter the despair, a girl's able to keep on living. I think that passion of yours became that certain person's gem, Haru."
"You're exaggerating it. There's no proof to what you said."
"Yep. But I got something more convincing."
"What's that?"
"A girl's instinct."
After saying that, Akane stopped talking. Her back clearly had the words 'don't ask' inscribed on it.
That moment, I finally noticed something. The silhouette that should be far from us passed us by. We chatted for a long time, huh? Seemed like it's a female. The long hairlocks entered a corner of my eyes for a moment, before leaving. I didn't get to see her. The sweet fragrance of spring however was proof that she once existed, lingering in the air.
Suddenly, a gust blew by, pushing my back.
A voice came along with it.
Just one sentence.
Yoshi-kun.
I felt that I was called by the latter bit of my name.
Hearing this for the first time, I hurriedly turned back, but there was nobody behind. Akane noticed me stopping, and turned to look towards me.

The next moment, we were both shocked, at a loss for words.
Before us, there was a breathtakingly beautiful scenery.
In the spring breeze, something akin to white light particles glittered, as though blessing the world.
It scattered.
LIke snowflakes.
–The sakura petals are dancing.
I opened my palm, gently grasped it, and opened it to see a white petal lying on it. The petal didn't melt because of my palm, and it got taken by the breeze again, flying to a distant unknown.
To a place I couldn't reach.
I was feeling a little forlorn. Why's that?
I sighed, and inhaled hard at this fresh air of spring.
"Tastes like snow."
"Eh, no way. There's no snow. It's the sakura smell."
I recalled myself playing a snowball fight against the elementary school kids this Winter.
To split teams, we used the sakura perfume. The snow with that fragrance hit my face, bringing much pain and cold. That, along with the sakura fragrance that followed, was ingrained deeply in my mind.
Snow giving off sakura fragrance. Two things that definitely couldn't coexist definitely meshed together. Isn't that interesting? There's nothing weird about that.
It's like the world's trying to hide a secret–
Most likely, it's called a miracle.
So I thought as I smiled, denying Akane's words,
"No, it's Yuki's smell."
I believe that in the future, every spring, I'll remember the melted snow.
For some reason, that alone is enough for me to happy about.

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